STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST ★

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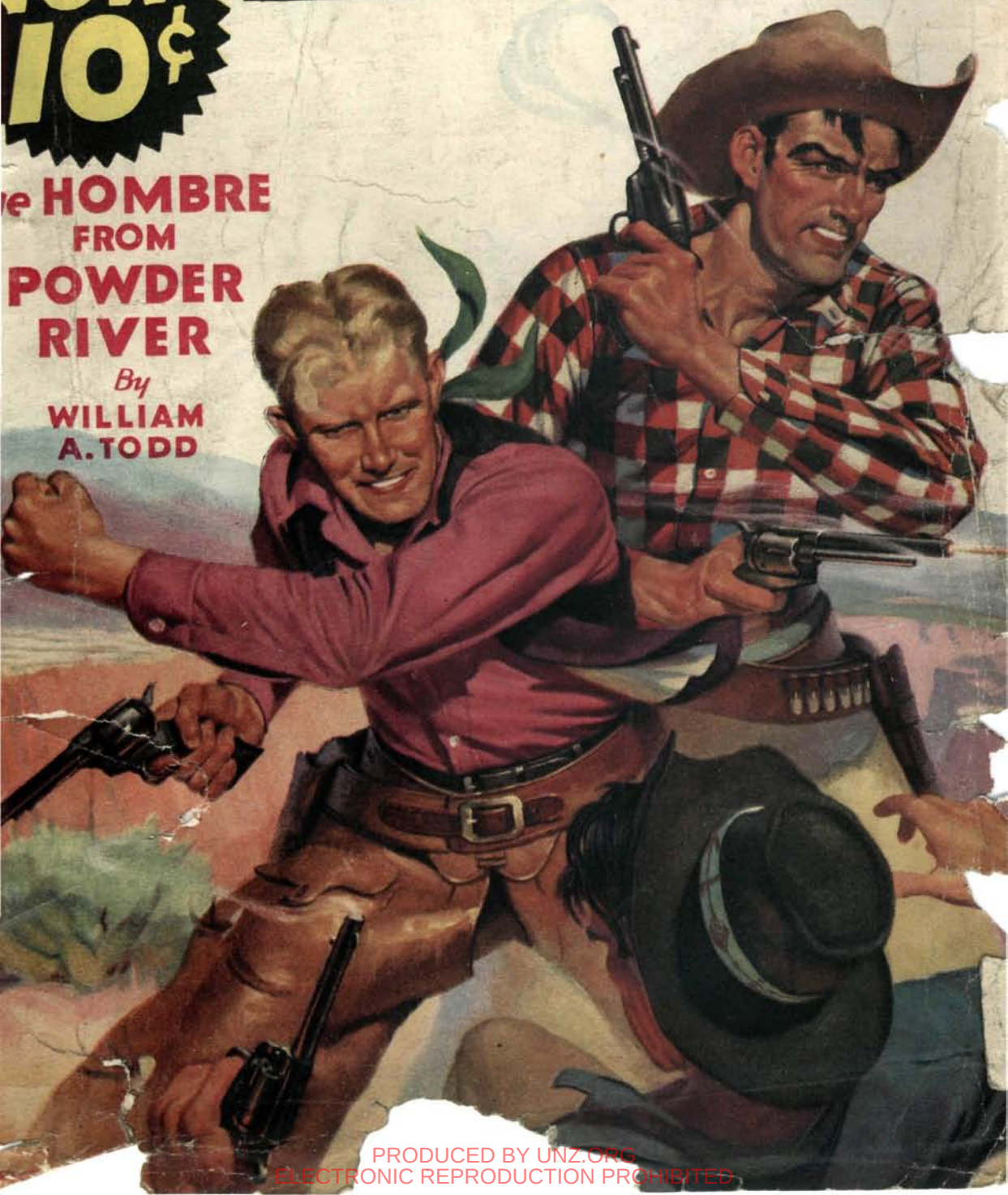
WEEKLY JAN. 11, 1936

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

NOW 10¢

The HOMBRE FROM POWDER RIVER

By WILLIAM A. TODD



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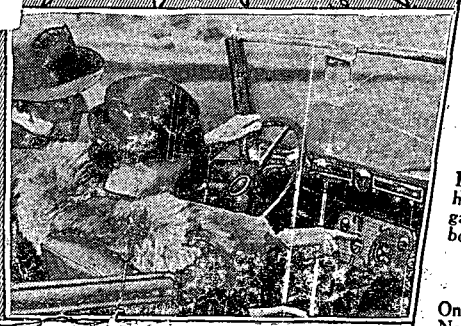
New INVENTION SAVES GAS!

1936

3 TO 7 MILES MORE PER GALLON

MOTORIST SAVES $180.00 a YEAR



Saves up to Thirty Per Cent On Gas. Provides Faster Pick-Up---More Power---Greater Mileage and Smoother Running.

GET FREE INFORMATION

CHRYSLER

Have tried the Vacu-matic and it sure is fine. Better pick-up with a 30% gas saving.—John C. Martin, Pa.

PLYMOUTH

I am amazed at Vacu-matic performance. It's giving me 5 more miles per gallon. Walter Zielinski, Ill.

V-8 FORD

I installed both Vacu-matics and they work excellent. On my own V8 Ford I notice wonderful performance in pickup, get-away and gas saving. — Burt Burnett, Mich.

BUICK

Everything you claim about Vacu matic is true. I now get 20 miles to the gallon. Before I was only averaging 15¼ miles. — C. Constantino, Fla.

FRANKLIN

With Vacu-matic I have increased my mileage from 10.1 to 14.2 miles per gallon. I figure I save over $75.00 a year in gasoline. R. K. Radtke. Wis.

SAVES $180 A YEAR

On my Plymouth 6 I obtained an average of 22 miles per gallon, an increase of 7 miles. This means a saving of $15 a month or $180 a year F S. Peck, Calif.

CHEVROLET

Please send me a Vacu-matic for a Model A. The mileage on my 1933 Chevrolet jumped from 18 to 22 miles per gal. with Vacu-matic. — Paul P Haas, Mass.

ALL WELL PLEASED

Enclosed find order for 12 more. Everyone I have sold is giving from 4 to 6 more miles per gallon. I have 3 more orders for V8 Ford. Every body is well pleased.—J. O. Carll, Texas.

MODEL A FORD

Have been using the Vacu-matic for a month. I used to get 20 to 22 miles per gal. Now I get 30 to 33 miles. It is amazing the difference it makes.—James W Barr, Canada.

NASH

On my Advanced 6 Nash gained 17½% in mileage. The car will idle down to 3 miles an hour and then take gas without a complaint. — J. Showalter, Mo

DODGE

Just completed 2310 miles on 92 gallons in my 1933 Dodge 6. This figures 25 miles while before I averaged only 20 miles per gal. on trips. — Al Fruzyna, Calif

OLDSMOBILE

I am well pleased with Vacu-matic on our Oldsmobile. A test proved it to give 18 miles per gal. Before we considered 13 good. — Arthur Williams, N Y

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited letters received from Vacu-matic users.

VACU-MATIC

PATENT PENDING

the Carburetor Control that "BREATHES"

AT LAST! Automotive engineers have smashed down the barriers to perfected combustion! The new VACU-MATIC solves the secret of greater power! With almost magical action, this amazing invention instantly puts new life and pep in any motor. It adds mileage to every gallon of gasoline . . . produces split-second pick-up, sensitive accelerator response, greater speed and smoother running

New- *Automatic*- Nothing Like It!

The self-starter—four wheel brakes—knee action—streamlining . . . and now VACU-MATIC! The greatest motor improvement of recent years! With it, engineers have achieved a practical means of balancing air and gasoline automatically for all speeds. Vacu-matic is ***entirely different!*** It is AUTOMATIC and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing automatically as required. No idling troubles—no carburetor adjustments necessary. Just put it on and forget it! Sharply cuts fuel wastes, saves dollars in gas costs, reduces carbon and gives your engine new pep, greater power and longer life.

Guaranteed Gas Savings

The VACU-MATIC proves itself on every car. It is guaranteed to give worth-while gas savings, quicker pick-up, and more power or it costs you nothing. "On a test I gained an average of 4 miles on a gallon," writes Alex Wertz. "Vacu-matic is the best I have ever tried." Clarence Rutzin—"I have tried the Vacu-matic on several tests and find that I get between 5 and 6 mile[illegible] increase, have more mileage, have greater pi[illegible]

Free Deta[illegible]

Learn about this remarkable device th[illegible] entire performance of your motor. Learn [illegible] you extra money to operate without VACU[illegible] your VACU-MATIC equipped car will leap a[illegible] without sputter or hesitation. Discover a new drivi[illegible] enjoy the savings. Get the facts! Write today!

FREE OFFER COUPON

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-157 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Gentlemen: Please send me full particulars concerning the Vacu-matic and details of your Free Offer. This of course does not obligate me in any way.

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Address.....

City..... State.....

☐ Check here if interested in selling proposition.

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VACU-MATIC is constructed of six parts, assembled and welded into one unit, correctly adjusted and ***sealed at the factory***. Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can attach VACU-MATIC in ten minutes. Once in, its only reminder is the surge of instant power and speed it gives to the motor and the savings it affords your pocketbook.

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- ☐ Welding, Electric and Gas
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- ☐ Boilermaker
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Telegraph Engineer
- ☐ Telephone Work ☐ Radio
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- ☐ Patternmaker
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City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

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Vol. 99, No. 2 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 11, 1936 Whole No. 1734

Cover Picture—Scene from
"The Hombre From Powder River" *Painted by R. G. Harris*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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Buck Foster buys it, an' from then on things are plumb hot fer Circle J.

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Size don't count fer nothin' when a waddy kin handle a Peacemaker.

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An' the Shootin' Fool is jest the hombre ter lay it down an' make it stick.

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 6AD
Washington, D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare time and full time job opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.
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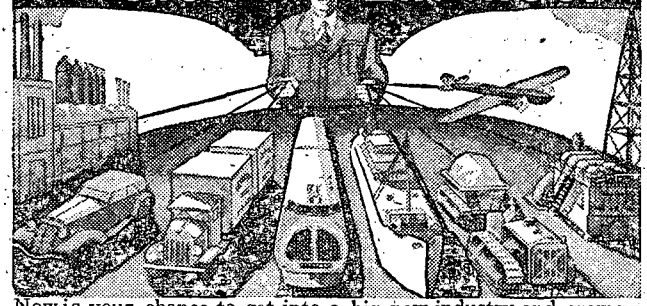
The Diesel Engineer



Is Your Job Safe?

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What This New Field Offers You

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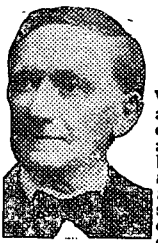

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ROMANO'S COIN SHOP, Dept. 584
Springfield, Mass.

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Harmony and Composition	
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$1.85 — 29x4.40-21
$2.15 — 29x4.75-19

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Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$1.85	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.00	.85
30x4.50-21	2.10	.85
28x4.75-19	2.15	.95
29x4.75-20	2.20	.95
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.25	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.35	1.35
6.00-16	3.65	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$1.85	$0.75
31x4	2.65	.85
32x4	2.65	.85
33x4	2.65	.85
34x4	2.90	.85
32x4½	3.00	1.15

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.70	$1.95
33x5	3.75	1.45
34x5	3.95	2.00
32x6	7.25	2.75
36x6	9.00	3.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.25	$1.65
6.50-20	3.60	1.95
7.00-20	4.85	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.10	$1.15
34x4½	3.10	1.15
30x5	3.30	1.35
33x5	3.40	1.45
35x5	3.55	1.55

Size	Tires	Tubes
34x7	$9.95	$3.25
38x7	9.95	3.95
36x8	10.65	3.95
40x8	12.65	4.15

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$5.40	$3.75
8.25-20	7.60	4.95
9.00-20	9.40	5.65
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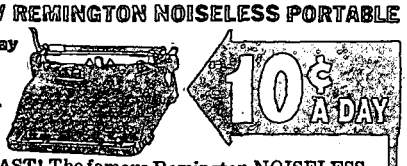

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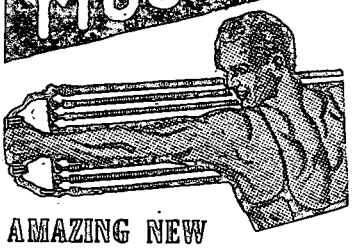

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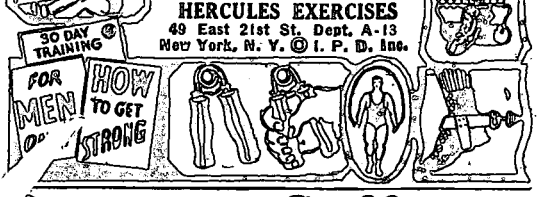

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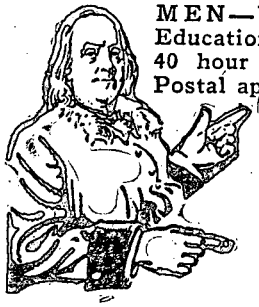

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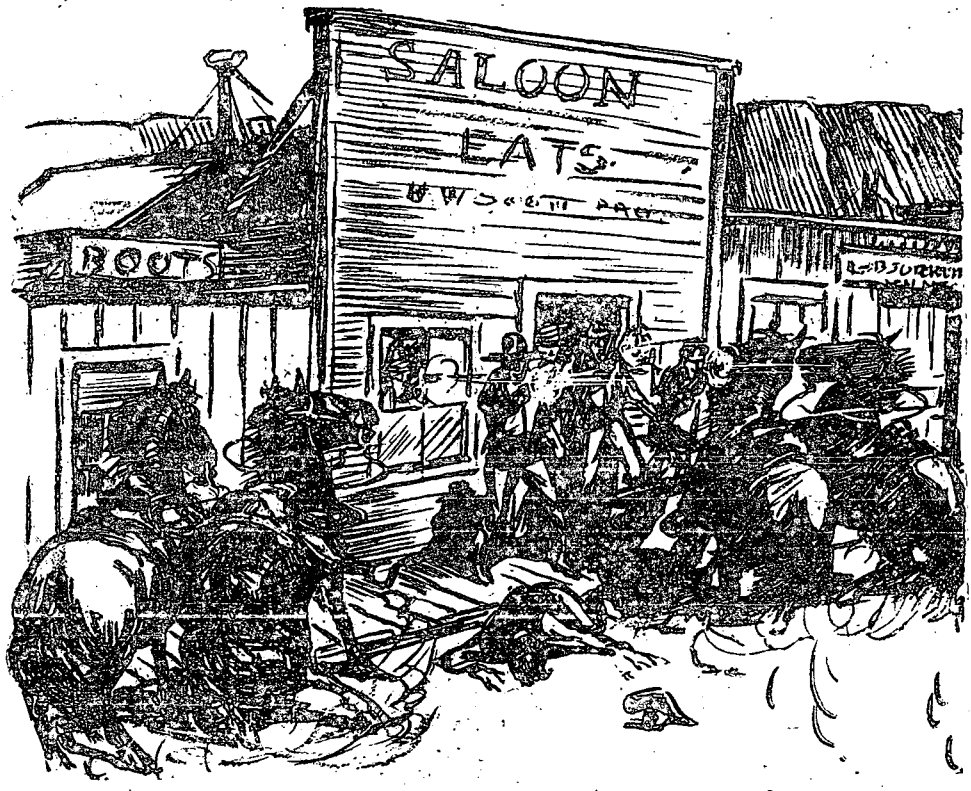

The Hombre From Powder River

By William A. Todd

Author of "Gun Slicks of the Sunset Trail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

CHALLENGED.

"SCRUB" REED and "Flagstaff" Martin were going to fight it out. This time with fists. Each had retired to a separate steer chute to kick off his spurs. While friends watched from the gates, they worked the kinks out of their shoulder muscles, suppled their knuckles, and practiced the business of screwing their features into ugly grimaces.

They were waiting for the boisterous crowds to shuffle out of the big grand stand near by. Then they would have an empty rodeo arena for their own private show.

Scrub and Flagstaff had just finished another kind of battle in that arena for the amusement of two thousand spectators at the Bitter Spring Stampede.

Scrub had copped the bull-dogging contest from Flagstaff by a fraction of a second. Then Flagstaff won

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the calf roping from Scrub. Scrub nosed him out in the bareback mustang race; Flagstaff came back by taking the fancy riding.

In the bronc-busting duel, they tied twice. So the judges told them to split the prize money for the best all-around performer.

But Scrub and Flagstaff were in no temper to split prizes.

Scrub had ridden all the way down from Montana to Bitter Spring, Wyoming. He was out to prove that a Powder River buckaroo could make any other type of puncher look like a sick dude.

As for Flagstaff, he had come up from the San Juan River in the South. He meant to prove that all cowboys are tinhorns until they get well cooked by the hot sands of Arizona and learn to slake their thirst from cactus.

When news of the judges' decision reached the ears of Scrub Reed, of Montana, he said to the chute foreman:

"Now ain't that just what a Montanan would expect from a bevy o' Wyoming hill-billies! Do they think that a long, lean, lanky bean pole with a face like a drowned hoss is

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as good as a Powder River gent? It ain't that I'm conceited. But my pards back home are counting hard on me to win. Yuh go tell that cross between a clothesline an' a turkey's neck that he's got more work to do afore he takes his afternoon nap."

Scrub himself didn't look like a matinée idol. His nose bone had long since been flattened by falls from outlaw broncs. His right cheek bore a scar from a steer horn. Only his small outthrust chin had been miraculously saved from scars.

He was built like a packing case, with sturdy shoulders that were almost as wide as his height. His close-cropped blond hair stood up brush-style. His blue eyes were eternally flashing like chips of ice, so that hombres suspected him of being in a constant state of excitement about life in general.

Scrub's remarks about Flagstaff worried the chute foreman.

"Calm down, hombre!" the foreman advised him. "Yuh two buckaroos have done all the rodeo stunts there is. Yuh come out even. Split the prize money. There ain't nothin' left in the way of contests but bare knuckles an' parchesi."

"That so!" Scrub snorted. "Then go ask the skinny galoot to take his pick o' them two. I ain't goin' home with no fifty-fifty split."

The chute foreman hiked down the gate line and found Flagstaff telling friends that the Wyoming judges didn't know any more about rodeos than they did about Chinese opera.

Flagstaff was no handsomer than Scrub had indicated. The Arizona waddy was so tall that the tail of his checkerboard shirt was always pulling out of the back belt of his denim pants. He had a hatchet face and unruly black hair that kept getting in the way of his lonesome brown eyes.

"What's that you said?" Flagstaff asked the chute foreman. "Does that sawed-off cricket up yonder figure that the judges missed the fine points of his sheep-herdin' style? Well, you go back an' tell him that I don't play parchesi like they do in Montana. I'll take him on at the brandin' game."

"The brandin'?"

"Shore. I'll put the brand of Arizona on his funny Montana map."

The chute foreman took this challenge back to Scrub Reed, and it wasn't long before stableboys, roustabouts, ticket takers, and various other rodeo employes were gathering at the chutes.

A black-coated gambler wormed through the rails into the pen.

"I'd like a word with you, Mr. Scrub Reed," the smooth-shaven shark called. "I'm willing to cut you into tall winnings if you'll listen to me."

Scrub eyed the visitor coldly. "I've seen yuh places before, stranger."

"I reckon you have," the gambler grinned. "I'm Sky Hilling. I've been to a lot of rodeos up in Montana. Now about this fight, friend" —his voice fell to a snaky whisper— "it would draw a big-paying crowd if they knew about it. Why not hold it to-night in a barn? We'll charge admission."

Scrub's hand sped out, grabbed the gambler by the front of his white linen vest. The Montanan was in no mood to be trifled with over a bit of mazuma.

Scrub had always despised the crooked gents who stood on the sidelines cleaning up fortunes from unsuspecting cowpokes. He remembered now that the sneaky-eyed "Sky" Hilling was a member of a

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gambling ring that once tried to get him to throw a bucking-horse contest. And as Scrub held Sky by the vest front, he didn't soften his reply:

"Why, yuh two-legged, double-crossin' coyote! I'm fightin' for the honor of Powder River. It ain't to make profit out of a grudge. I don't even hold no grudge agin' Flagstaff, except that he didn't sprout on my stampin' grounds. But I shore have a grizzly-sized grudge agin' yuh. I ought to paste yuh right now for all the skunky tricks that yuh've pulled on——"

Scrub didn't finish. Sky Hilling tried to jerk free of Scrub's grip, but he couldn't. Sky's pink cheeks went pale, his tawny eyes flashed in fear.

He had his hands free. His right arm whipped to the rear of his black swallowtail coat, under which a holstered six-gun was hidden. Sky caught the butt with talonlike fingers, jerked the weapon loose, and was about to whisk the barrel into aim at Scrub when something prevented him.

That something was another hombre who had come into the steer pen without being seen by Scrub or the gambler. The newcomer was a dignified hombre with cool gray eyes and a drooping cowhorn mustache.

He was dressed in a holiday suit of blue serge, but on his head was a ten-gallon range hat and about his hips was a loaded cartridge belt. This man lunged and caught Sky's gun wrist in a viselike grip.

"Drop that cutter, gambling man!" the newcomer snapped. "Drop it and clear out of these rodeo grounds before I have you tarred and feathered."

"Tom Barry!" the gambler gasped, recognizing the speaker's voice. Sky's fingers let go of the gun butt as if it were hot.

Scrub had heard the name of the newcomer before. It was that of a wealthy cattle baron whose hobby was the breeding of fine Western race horses. From past experience at rodeo tracks, Scrub knew that Tom Barry's string always ran fair.

It was said that Barry spent all his race profits on maintaining a farm for old and crippled broncs that had worn out their hearts in the service of man. Scrub secretly wished to be an upstanding hombre like Tom Barry some day, and he held the name of the man in awe.

"Tom Barry!" the Montanan exclaimed, and he let go of Sky Hilling's vest. "Say—yo're really Tom Barry? Gosh, I was jest tellin' this gamblin' skunk——"

"I heard it all," Tom Barry interrupted as Sky Hilling darted aside. "Let him go, Scrub. Don't soil your hands on the likes of him. Fists are the business of small boys."

Scrub's hot eyes followed Sky's flight through the rails of the chute. He might have chased him, but Barry's last remark about fists halted him. Scrub's tanned face reddened.

"Mebbe my temper was getting the best of me. Was he going to pull a gun? Yuh did me a big favor, Mr. Barry. I hope some day that I can repay it."

The cattleman held out his hand. "Shake, Scrub," he invited. "You certainly can repay that favor. You can do it by dropping this childish fight with Flagstaff Martin."

Scrub, in the act of clasping the cattleman's hand, stiffened. "What's that? Just a second, hombre. I don't want to do anythin' under false pretenses. Me an' Flagstaff ain't mixin' into no schoolboy jamboree. This is a regular civil war, the north agin' the south."

"That war's been fought and finished," Tom Barry replied. "And most folks believe it ended with

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more enemies than when it started. I'm counting on you showing a man-size sense, Scrub. I've got a powerfully interesting proposition to offer you and Flagstaff. I've been sitting up in the stands thinking that you two are the finest punchers I've ever seen."

"Yuh made a heap big mistake about a man from Arizona bein' a puncher," Scrub said quickly.

"I never made a mistake about a young buckaroo. That's why I want you and Flagstaff to work for me."

"Work for yuh! Both of us on the same spread!"

"It's a horse-hunting job," the cattleman explained. "Come up to the stables where we can talk in private. I've already spoken to Flagstaff. He's waiting there. He doesn't like meeting you any better than you do him. But he's big enough to listen to reason. How about you?"

Scrub wrinkled his pug nose. He had never backed out of a scrap in his life. He certainly didn't want to back out of this one, now that word had got around that he and Flagstaff were going to decide the merits of Montana and Arizona.

But Scrub could not bring himself now to argue with an hombre like Tom Barry. Inwardly, the Montana star felt that fist fighting had nothing to do with rodeo contests. He certainly didn't want the cattleman to think that he was an ornery Injun.

"I'll make no promises," Scrub said stubbornly. "If Flagstaff kin hog tie his temper for a spell, so kin a waddy from Montana. I'll go with yuh, Mr. Barry, but wait until I strap on my smoke-pole."

"I'll wait," the cattleman replied coolly. "Flagstaff is wearing his gun, and I'm wearing mine. The first one of you that gets nervous-fingered will have to outdraw me."

Scrub halted from taking his gun down from a chute rail. He wheeled, stared at the poker face of Tom Barry. He could read nothing in the cattleman's gray eyes. With a shrug, Scrub turned to buckle on his hogleg.

He was remembering that Tom Barry had been a lead-burning sheriff in his younger days. There were more than a few outlaws in Boot Hill because they thought that they could outdraw Tom Barry.

Only one hombre had ever done it. He was a horse thief, whose bullet took Tom Barry alongside the temple, creasing him and leaving a scar for life. And Barry had sworn to find that hombre some day, if it took forever.

CHAPTER II.

NEWS FOR OUTLAWS.

IN the seclusion of a dim stall, Scrub Reed sat on an upturned water bucket in one corner, while Flagstaff Martin lounged on a bale of straw in another. Their faces were masks as they listened to Tom Barry, who stood with thumbs hooked in his gun belt.

Behind the cattleman the stable door was locked. In stalls on either side of him, broncs munched oats, stamped their hoofs, and flipped their tails at droning flies.

"Here's what I want of you two," Tom was saying. "Over near the Great Salt Desert there's a hidden valley full of the finest hossflesh that the West ever saw. I don't know how the first of the herd ever got there. Mebbe, a long time ago, a wild Spanish stallion led a bunch of Arabian mares up there. Or mebbe some Indian stole the first stock from the *conquistadores*.

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Anyway, hosses don't come any better than them that are there now. If you hombres ever set eyes on them, you'd think you had died in your sleep and were waking up in the happy hunting ground."

"Huh!" Scrub grunted, and shot a suspicious glance at Flagstaff.

Flagstaff said nothing. He was stroking his lean chin. It was a cinch that he didn't enjoy this peace fest. But Flagstaff, too, had heard about Tom Barry. And once the lanky waddy had been known to say that if he, Flagstaff, ever made a million, he'd do the same thing that Tom Barry was doing in this world.

"I want you two to borrow, beg, or buy that lost herd for me," the cattle baron went on. "I don't care what it costs. I'll pay anything. I absolutely trust you two to bring back that herd to my spread in Wyoming. Name your own wages. I figure that you have enough common sense to drop this rodeo quarrel. I won't insult your intelligence by asking you to shake hands with each other. I know that as sure as eggs are eggs, once you two start off, you'll come back the best of pards, each ready to die for the other."

Scrub and Flagstaff rose from their seats like two bristling dogs—Scrub, a pug-nosed terrier; Flagstaff, a lean-flanked lion hound. They spoke at the same time.

"What do yuh mean, 'pards'!" Scrub exploded.

"Me eat grub with a Montana tinhorn?" Flagstaff exclaimed.

Tom Barry's right hand flashed across his thigh, caught his gun butt with a lightning twist of the wrist, and flipped the barrel to light in the fastest draw that the two rodeo stars had ever witnessed.

"Shut up, sit down, and listen!" the cattleman roared in the kind of tone that was used to commanding. "I'm telling you about this lost herd." His voice grew calmer as Scrub and Flagstaff sank back to their seats, eying the jutting weapon. "There's only one man in this world who knows where that hidden valley is. His name is Paisano Smith. You, Flagstaff, must know what a '*paisano*' is."

Flagstaff's lips were frozen.

"A *paisano* is a Mexican woodcock," Tom Barry explained for Scrub Reed. "It's the sworn enemy of snakes, skunks, and vermin. It slips through the brush and rocks as slick as an eel. It's more clever than a lobo. I could go on reciting about the *paisano* for hours. And I'd be describing the Smith gent to a T. He lives in that hidden valley and bushwhacks every two-legged skunk who comes after his fine hosses."

Scrub's blue eyes widened. He couldn't help forgetting the feud for a moment. And neither could Flagstaff, whose mouth dropped open.

"I reckon that you want to know how I found out about Paisano Smith's herd," Tom Barry chuckled. "Well, he has one weakness in life. That's faro. Paisano Smith has a habit of appearing at odd times at first one trading post and then another. He always brings an extra bronc to sell for grub money. He always breaks down and cries like a baby when the livery keepers give him five hundred bucks for the spare horse. Then Paisano goes up to the faro tables in the hope of winning enough to buy back the cayuse. He always loses. The gamblers then stake him to grub supplies, and he vanishes from sight."

"Waal, I'll be durned!" Scrub gasped. "Paisano must be loco."

"Yuh mean Paisano's broncs are worth five hundred bucks apiece to

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any livery owner!" Flagstaff exclaimed. "Or do the faro dealers rig the deal on him, knowing they'll cheat him out of every cent?"

"That's something like it," Tom Barry went on, holstering his gun. "Paisano's hosses always fall into the hands of cheap gamblers like that Sky Hilling coyote. Those gamblers have a ring. They send the hosses to the tracks and race them into an early grave to make quick money. They always know that Paisano will turn up again with another horse for them to kill. Whenever one of my broncs is beaten, I know that it's by a Paisano Smith critter."

Scrub Reed leaped from his water bucket, blue eyes sparkling. "I get yuh, Tom Barry!" he cried. "Yuh want to buy out Paisano to keep the gamblin' skunks from ruining fine race stock."

Flagstaff swung off the bale of hay, brushing a mop of hair out of his eyes. "Tom Barry," he said, "yo're everythin' that they say about you. Yo're a real white man. I'll go get those broncs for you."

Scrub whirled. "Yuh sartin won't!" he snapped. "It's my job. Yuh kin have the hull rodeo prize. I'll buy out yore interest in this deal."

Tom Barry roared with laughter. He knew he had roped the pair now. Anything that would make them forget about the rodeo prize was big enough to hold them for months.

"Calm down, boys!" he chuckled. "I've got two maps here, one for each of you. They show the probable location of Paisano's valley. They also show all the towns where he's played faro in the last year. He changes each time. There's one in his neighborhood which he hasn't visited yet. That's Gun Creek, where I think you might wait for him this time."

The cattleman paused. The dead silence of Scrub and Flagstaff drew his eyes. He found them crouched over, glaring at each other. There was a shaft of sunlight coming through a small window of the stable, and it fell in the stall upon the two rodeo stars.

As Tom Barry looked at them, the sunlight went out. And he suddenly realized that somebody was peeking in the window behind him, to see what was going on in the stall.

"Duck!" Tom Barry yelled.

Scrub and Flagstaff ducked none too soon. If Barry had shouted to stop them from drawing on each other, and not because he expected the hombre at the window to do any damage, then the cattleman was wrong. For a small-caliber weapon exploded from the stable window. A bullet narrowly missed Barry and the two waddies.

Scrub and Flagstaff drew as they dropped to the floor. Their gun muzzles swerved to the stable window. But they were too late to see a white face. They heard the thump of boots outside—boots without spurs.

"After him!" Scrub shouted.

There was a delay in unlocking the stable door. Then Scrub, Barry, and Flagstaff piled out into the yard. The sun was in their eyes, blinding them. They failed to detect the disappearance of a pair of fluttering coat tails around the far right corner of the livery.

They spied a crowd of men racing toward them from the steer chutes. Evidently curious hombres wanted to know the reason for the shot.

"The sneak got away!" Tom Barry growled, for he didn't want Scrub and Flagstaff to be egged into a fight by the arriving crowd.

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"Come back inside, boys. That was a derringer shot. Somebody was listening to us. He evidently figured to make you two boys kill each other and me in the bargain."

Scrub bit his lips, holstered his six-gun. "A derringer, eh?" he growled, walking back into the stable. "That sounds like a gambler."

Flagstaff spat at a spider on the doorsill. "There's a snake by the name o' Sky Hilling round hyar. He ain't got much use for me since the time I busted him for cheating a rube."

Tom Barry locked the door against the crowd that tried to follow them inside.

"Do you see what your consarned feud has got me into?" he asked the rodeo stars. "I'll bet my eyeteeth that that was Sky Hilling. It puts a crimp in my plans to buy Paisano Smith's broncs. Sky will warn every gambler in Utah and Wyoming. This must be my reward for thinking that you two hombres had enough sense to stop feuding."

The cattleman's contempt struck Scrub hard. "I said I'd get the lost herd myself," he muttered.

Flagstaff's lean cheek muscles tightened. "I'm doin' it by my lonesome."

An icy glint crept into Tom Barry's gray eyes. "You go together or not at all," he snapped. "If neither of you are big enough to give up a kid's quarrel, I don't want you meddling with fine hosses. Answer me yes or no."

Scrub moved uneasily. "I reckon that Sky does put a new aspect on things," he said humbly.

"Reckon he does," the Arizonian muttered, dropping his eyes floorward.

"How about it, Scrub?" Tom Barry asked stiffly. "Yes or no?"

"Mebbe," the sawed-off Montanan hedged. "But I ain't makin' no promises about the safety o' this Arizona fellar."

"And you, Flagstaff?" the cattleman asked.

"Me!" the Arizonian flared up. "I'm leaving for Gun Creek now. If this Montana wart figures on following me, that's his business." He turned on his heel, as proud as a turkey cock, and opened the stable door. "There will be plenty of chance for me an' the Montanan to settle our difficulties in private." He strode out to get his horse.

Scrub started to leap after him, but Tom Barry threw up a hand, stopping the stocky waddy.

"That suits me!" Tom Barry called so that Flagstaff could hear. "You both have the job. But if you both don't come back alive, I'll settle with the one who does—with lead."

Scrub's eyes shot to the dignified cattleman in an attempt to discover Barry's true meaning. But the man's face was unfathomable. Men said that Tom Barry never revealed his innermost thoughts, whether he was losing, winning, about to go for a gun, or raise a hand's pay. Only what Barry said could be counted on.

And Scrub Reed realized that the cattleman would keep the promise of those last words. Barry would certainly settle with lead if either rodeo star was loco enough to send the other to Boot Hill.

CHAPTER III.

A PLOT.

THE face at the stable window had been Sky Hilling's. When he fired his derringer at the two rodeo stars, it was for a more important reason than vengeance.

He had overheard Tom Barry,

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and the story drove Sky to reckless rage. He fired at Scrub and Flagstaff in order to protect the profits which a gambling ring was making out of two beautifully bred race horses—horses which had come into their hands by cheating a queer old codger known as "Paisano" Smith.

As Sky fled around the corner of the stables, he swore at the luck of Tom Barry in finding out about Paisano. Coat tails flapping, Sky ducked behind the steer chutes, scuttled along them, and raced to get under the grand stand.

"Those two waddies will be shore to find Paisano," he puffed. "I've got to get word to Gun Creek and warn the ring. It'll take tall riding to beat those sage hounds. How did the Barry skunk ever find out about Paisano?"

There was a saddle cayuse waiting for Sky near the performers' entrance to the rodeo ring. He didn't stop to put on spurs. He ripped the reins from the hitch rail and swung to the saddle.

Sky quirted into a side street, beat down it in a cloud of dust, and swung recklessly into a wagon-rutted road. Several roustabouts called to him.

"I'm goin' to East River to see a dyin' friend!" Sky shouted back.

But when the gambler had thundered out of Bitter Spring, he didn't turn east. He reined to the open prairie on the west.

There were no wire fences between him and the town of Big Hills, fifty miles away. The stage road was the longer way around to the next stop.

Sky took off his coat and vest, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and went to work to get the maximum of speed out of his black cayuse.

Before the sun had set, the gambler was in Big Hills. He stopped long enough to get a swallow of whisky from a livery owner and to trade his exhausted black for a fresh sorrel. As he talked, he changed his trick gambler jeans for khaki pants and chaps.

"Is Dice Randall dealin' faro up at the Blind Mule Bar?" he asked.

"He nicked me for five bucks last night," the liveryman replied.

"Here's the five," Sky said grandly, peeling a bill from a big roll. "Tell Dice to send a rider to the nearest railroad junction. I want a telegram relayed to the boys in Utah to meet me at No. 9 as soon as possible. Remember that. No. 9. An' if you don't keep a tight lip, you'll regret it."

"I ain't ever talked yet, Sky."

"Adios," the gambler said, and roared away on the fresh sorrel.

He knew the telegram would be sent. No. 9 was the gamblers' code for the town of Gun Creek, Utah.

At midnight, Sky reached the State border and changed horses at a whisky peddler's place in a canebrake. The gambler's muscles were as tight as barbed wire, his head whirled, and it required a pint of liquor to get him in condition to go on.

He took a mountain road at a swift trot on a new buckskin bronc of stocky build. He was no horseman. But behind him, Scrub and Flagstaff were certainly not changing mounts. It was a cinch that they couldn't catch up with him if he kept moving night and day.

The next morning he took an hour's sleep and some food in Salmonville in the back room of a saloon. Then he went on, and kept at it for two more days and nights.

Sky was a haggard wreck when he pulled into the ramshackle town of Gun Creek. Mud caked his un-

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shaven cheeks. His eyes were red-rimmed and half closed.

He was clinging to the saddle pommel of a staggering bay bronc as he turned down the main street. Halting before the Great Salty Bar, he didn't bear the slightest resemblance to a smooth-shaven, well-dressed gambling man.

So it was that four gun-hung hombres in front of the Great Salty Bar did not recognize him. They had just ridden into Gun Creek in answer to a strange telegram from a Wyoming depot. They grinned upon seeing Sky swaying in the saddle.

Here was some half-starved fugitive from the law, they suspected. Evidently the poor feller had been prodding night and day to beat a posse. And from the way he looked, he must have left the John Laws a hundred miles behind.

Sky Hilling blinked at them, seeing the four grinning faces in a hazy fog.

"It's the boys," the gambler croaked. "Ain't you going to help me down, Shifty? And you, Rip, what's the matter?"

The narrow-shouldered gunman called "Shifty" twitched. "If it ain't Sky Hilling!" he gasped.

"I'll say it ain't," the husky black-bearded tough known as "Rip" snorted. "I know Sky when I—— Say! It *is* him. Grab him!"

The four toughs leaped to catch the gambler as he pitched over the flank of his foam-flecked bronc. They carried him into the Great Salty Bar, elbowing aside customers and waiters.

Passing the poker and faro tables, they went into a back room and slammed the door shut. Sky was laid on a cot. Shifty dripped whisky into his lips, Rip slapped his wrists.

It was several minutes before the gambler regained consciousness. He opened dazed, bloodshot eyes. A cold shiver went through him.

"Where's Paisano?" he asked in a husky whisper.

The narrow-shouldered Shifty leaned over him. "The coyote ain't turned up anywhere this month," he replied. "What's wrong with yuh, Sky? Did the law find yuh out? We kin sneak yuh out o' hyar an' into the canyon country."

Sky groped for the whisky bottle in Shifty's hand. "Give me a drink." He took a stiff one lying flat on his back. "I've been riding for three days an' nights," he muttered wearily. "I always said we shouldn't let Paisano run loose. We should have tortured the secret of his valley out of him. Listen to me. I got bad news."

With the help of more liquor, the four gunmen got the full story of Tom Barry out of Sky Hilling. Then the gambler's eyes winked shut. He was snoring like a buzz saw.

The gunmen sat looking at him in bafflement. They didn't seem to understand how an hombre of Sky's easy life could make the trip from Bitter Spring, Wyoming, to Gun Creek, Utah, in three days.

The four had always seen Sky with hair sleeked back. Now it was a tangled thatch of dirty gray. And his formerly white forehead was scorched to a deep copper by the sun.

Deep wrinkles were at the corners of his eyes from squinting into the dust. His beard was an inch thick, while he always had been as smooth-shaven as a brook trout. His shirt was in rags, his chaps scratched and stained.

"He's almost as pizenous-lookin' as Paisano hisself," Rip grunted.

Shifty started. "He is, ain't he?"

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the wiry gun slinger said. "That gives me an idear. Nobody would recognize Sky now; only his best friends. We've got a chance to pull a quick deal for a lot o' mazuma."

"Spill it!" a scar-faced member of the four invited.

Shifty showed his jagged teeth in a wicked smile.

"We'll pass Sky off for Paisano on those two rodeo kids," he chuckled. "They ain't ever seen the old hoss breeder. Not many hombres have. An' those two kids have never seen Sky lookin' like this. We'll keep Sky full o' liquor an' away from soap an' water until Tom Barry's wranglers arrive. Didn't Sky tell us that Barry was ready to pay anythin' for Paisano's herd?"

The big Rip stroked his beard. "What if Paisano does turn up in Gun Crick? We're expectin' him."

Shifty tapped his gun butt. "We won't let Paisano get anywhere near town," he snarled. "This joint is full o' shady riders. We'll hire 'em all. We'll send 'em out to watch the passes that lead here. They'll stop Paisano if he's coming this way. Then we'll kill two birds with one shot. We'll clean up money from Tom Barry by foolin' his wranglers. We'll torture the secret o' that hidden valley out o' Paisano. How's that?"

"We'll drink on it," Rip replied, and his face cracked in a big smile.

CHAPTER IV.

A SKUNK IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

AT the moment that Sky Hilling lay snoring in the back room of the Great Salty Bar, Scrub Reed and Flagstaff Martin were trotting over the trail to Gun Creek. The two rodeo stars were not side by side. They were separated by a good quarter of a mile, which gave the dust of Flagstaff's horse time to settle before Scrub came along.

Scrub had chosen the rear position because he suspected that Flagstaff would race if he tried to get ahead. Scrub didn't want to exhaust his bronc on the long trip to Utah.

He had a few plans up his sleeve. But if anybody had said anything about his keeping behind Flagstaff, Scrub would have explained that he was protecting himself against being shot in the back by an Arizona rattlesnake. Scrub was hoping somebody would ask him and that Flagstaff would hear the insult.

At night, when Flagstaff turned off the trail to make camp in a clump of trees, Scrub likewise halted—a quarter of a mile away. They cooked over two fires, watered at different parts of the creeks, and slept with guns in their hands and one eye open.

Every day, the pair passed through a town, bought supplies at separate stores, paused to ask innocent questions about the country from different citizens, and then rode on.

Scrub had Flagstaff in sight when the latter halted at the Wyoming-Utah border. He saw Flagstaff draw a six-gun and punch two bullets through the signpost at a distance of fifty yards, then ride on.

When Scrub drew up to the border, he noted that one of Flagstaff's slugs had hit the "O" in Wyoming dead center. The other slug had gone through the closed part of the "A" in Utah.

Scrub drew his .45, glanced up the road, and found Flagstaff gazing back with a meaning grin. Scrub flicked his eyes to the blue sky, where a buzzard was circling low to investigate the passage of the two waddies over the lonely road.

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Scrub fired. The buzzard staggered, fluttered its wings, then dived to earth, leaving a trail of feathers behind it.

"Mebbe that won't give him a pain in the neck," Scrub chuckled, as Flagstaff twisted in the saddle and cantered on into Utah.

Two days later they were approaching the line of the county in which Gun Creek was situated. It was raining pitchforks. Clad in a slicker, Scrub could barely make out the gleaming poncho of Flagstaff up ahead of him.

He saw the Arizona puncher halt on the bank of a swollen river and swing down from his bronc. Scrub kept moving. This was the first time that anything had stopped them on the open road except night.

As Scrub's pinto came up behind Flagstaff's roan, Flagstaff was standing on the bank, throwing stones into the raging river in an attempt to find out the depth of the ford. Scrub halted.

Flagstaff turned to eye him. They said nothing. Both were plenty miserable in the rain, and they would have given anything for a fire in a line camp. Scrub was beginning to feel the foolishness of their antics. He couldn't help speaking.

"Up in Montana, we swim the rivers with our hosses," he remarked.

Flagstaff's eyes burned. "In Arizona, we think more of our cayuses than showing off," he growled.

Scrub's jaw went hard. "Too bad this river didn't run through the rodeo ground," he snapped, and swung down from the saddle.

Flagstaff scowled. "I call the bet," he said tonelessly. "Make it with yore hoss an' yuh win."

Scrub peeled off his slicker, chaps, boots, shirt, and pants, and tied them all behind the cantle of his saddle. He removed his bronc's bridle and put on a halter to which was attached a rope.

Without another word to his rival, he strode down the bank of the river and began wading into the water. The current swept against his legs, swirled around his hips, then was driving into his chest. He halted, planted on two feet like an oak, drawing his pinto toward him.

The animal jerked back, terrified by the roar of the icy water. Scrub called to it, braced against the rope, and tried to drag it toward him. His feet slipped. He went down. The current caught him, sucked him under.

Holding to the halter rope for dear life, he felt the animal being drawn into the river after him. He came above the surface in a whirlpool that chilled him to the bone.

"Come back," he heard Flagstaff yelling.

Shaking the water out of his eyes, Scrub saw his bronc swimming madly toward him for aid. Now the river was sweeping him and the mount along like two feathers in a gale. He could see the tall puncher racing along the bank with a lariat in hand, but already Scrub and his bronc were far out of casting range.

"Catfish!" the Montanan gasped. "I shore done it this time."

As he tied the halter rope about his waist, he went under the surface again, holding his breath. He felt a jagged rock strike his boot toe, but he couldn't touch bottom.

Clawing desperately, he came to the surface and spat water from his mouth. He was astonished to find himself a hundred yards away from the racing Flagstaff, and well out in the middle of the raging river.

The horse was floundering toward him, teeth bared, eyes popping with panic. It seemed that the animal thought that safety lay in overtak-

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ing its owner and climbing up on his body.

Scrub whirled and, hand over hand, began swimming for the western shore. His husky arms drew the bronc along like the paddlewheels of a river boat, although the horse was swimming itself.

Drifting logs sloshed past the Montanan. Brush swept into his face. He fought for his life. And luck favored him. The river swept into a bend and carried him like an eggshell to the shore line.

Scrub grasped for the roots of a tree almost torn from the bank. Panting, sputtering, he hauled himself out of the water, dragging his floundering horse behind him.

A moment later, puncher and cayuse stood dripping on safe ground.

Far up the river, on the opposite shore, the lean Flagstaff was cupping his eyes with his hand to shield them from the blinding rain. Scrub waved to him and began to dress in soggy garments.

He saw Flagstaff stalk off. Where he went, Scrub couldn't say. When the Montanan rode north up the bank, he couldn't discover the other waddy.

"It's dollars to pancakes that he won't swim it," Scrub snorted. "He's either lookin' for a bridge, a shallow ford, or he's goin' back to Bitter Spring. That leaves this horse-huntin' job for me."

Mounting, Scrub Reed struck out for Gun Creek.

On the following day, Scrub sighted a deep valley in the rocky slopes of the mountains that led down to Great Salt Desert. Smoke rose from the chimneys of a town almost hidden in the valley bottom. The sun was shining, but Scrub was gloomy and found no enthusiasm in reaching the end of his trip.

As he trotted his pinto down the craggy trail to Gun Creek, his mind was back on the swollen river where he had almost lost his life. He remembered what Tom Barry had said about using horse sense.

Scrub certainly hadn't thought twice before trying to swim the torrent, while Flagstaff had. Scrub hadn't beaten Flagstaff; he had shown himself a fool and had been saved by fool's luck.

"It's kind of lonesome without that ornery cactus around," Scrub admitted. "It takes the excitement out o' this job. If I don't show more intelligence with that Paisano gent, I won't even get into the saddle before I'm thrown."

The first dilapidated cabins were at hand, and Scrub gave them a curious scrutiny. This was a man's town, without women and children.

It had no calling. Cows, sheep, mining, and farming were unprofitable, and the salt desert near by provided no livelihood. Yet there were signs of human life in those first cabins.

Scrub detected the odor of cooking bacon and coffee. He caught glimpses of unshaven faces peeking out of windows as he passed.

"Shifty gents," he muttered, turning his pinto into the rutted main street.

There he spied several trading posts and guessed that trappers, horse hunters, and wandering prospectors sometimes dropped into town to replenish their supplies.

The two saloons and dance halls told him another story. They drew the wild bunch. Gun Creek was well named. It was a safe place for owl-hooters to spend their ill-gotten gains.

Scrub reined up at the livery,

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where a bald-headed hombre was idly whittling a stick. The Montanan said howdy and looked the man over. He wanted to be sure that his pinto would have a decent attendant.

"Want ter put yore cayuse up fer two bits?" the baldhead asked lazily. "Hay an' water fer that. Oats extra."

Scrub dismounted. "Let's see what the feed looks like," he said. "Also the stall. I might be spending a bit o' time hyar."

The baldhead shut his knife and got to his feet. "Kind o' persnickety, ain't yuh?" he snorted, and gazed at Scrub's pinto. "What's so all-fired fine about that cayuse? I seen better."

Scrub's jaw came out. "That so?" he snapped. "That cayuse needs a bit o' curryin' right now, but I'd like to see the bronc that can touch him."

"I seen one only ter-day," the baldhead chuckled, stalking into the livery. "Hyar's the feed box. Have a look."

Following him, Scrub glanced at the oat bin and had no complaint. But he did have a question.

"What are yuh talkin' about—yuh seen a hoss to-day to match my pinto."

The baldhead shrugged and reached from chaw tobacco, as if the question was of little importance. "Aw, don't git sore. Lots o' fine broncs come ter Gun Crick. Thar was a funny ol' coyote hyar this mornin' tryin' ter palm off a wild two-year-old fer five hundred bucks. I jes' laughed in his face. Five hun'red bucks! If I had that, I'd clear out o' this town."

Scrub's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. He felt dizzy.

"What did that hombre look like? Where did he go? What happened to the wild two-year-old?" He couldn't speak fast enough.

The liveryman was about to put a chaw in his mouth. He halted, stared curiously at the Montanan.

"What aire yuh so excited about?" he asked. "Yuh ain't gunnin' fer that gent?"

"No," Scrub assured him. "He's a friend o' mine. Where did he go?"

"If that's the case, yuh'll find him up at the Great Salty Bar weepin' like a lost babe. The danged fool sold his colt to an hombre who was in a hurry ter leave town. I'll be gosh-dinged if he didn't git four hundred fer it. Now the jackass is gamblin' an' drinkin' up the profit."

"Great Salty Bar!" Scrub exclaimed, wheeling to the door. "Take care o' the pinto, pard. I've got big business on hand."

And he went striding up the plank sidewalks, chuckling inwardly that the livery owner didn't know a real two-year-old thoroughbred when he saw one.

What luck! Paisano was in town, and perhaps nobody knew him. Was Tom Barry right about where the old coot would come next! Scrub Reed's blood was tingling as he shouldered through the swinging doors of the Great Salty and halted to peer into the tobacco fog for a gent who might be Paisano.

There was a throng of belted and booted hombres standing at the gleaming bar that ran along the right side of the saloon. To the left were several poker tables, some catering to rings of saddle tramps and silk-shirted riders who sat with hats pulled close down to their eyes.

At the back of the mud-caked floor was a faro table, crowded with boisterous men. The call of the faro dealer lifted above the hubbub as Scrub stood in the swinging doors,

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and his presence brought a swift hush upon the gambling.

Players wheeled to stare at him. And as they did so, he could see through the crowd at the faro table.

"Paisano!" Scrub ejaculated in a tone heard only by himself.

The Montanan's sharp blue eyes focused upon a haggard wreck of an hombre sitting dejectedly at the faro table. The man's eyes were red-rimmed from what appeared to have been a fit of weeping.

His week-old beard was streaked with wet mud. His nose was swollen and red as a beet. With trembling fingers, he was dipping into a patched wallet to find money which wasn't there. Tattered, beaten, helpless, the fellow touched Scrub Reed's sympathy deeply.

The Montanan's hand dropped to a gun butt, and he started forward to rescue the man he took to be Paisano from this den of thieves.

CHAPTER V.

BUSHWHACKED.

THERE was nothing yellow about Flagstaff Martin. After seeing Scrub Reed fight his way across the swollen river, the Arizona waddy's heart pitched into the depths of despair. He felt that he had been licked hands down by a better man.

He drew back from the bank to nurse his wounded pride in the covert of a patch of willows where his roan was waiting. It was not good common sense that stopped Flagstaff from plunging into the river to follow the Montanan. It was fear.

Flagstaff Martin could not swim. Only an hombre who has never learned to solve the mystery of keeping afloat in dark, deep water could appreciate Flagstaff's awe of Scrub Reed's accomplishment.

The Arizonian had been born on sand, bred on cactus, and seen so little water in his life that he always considered swimming the business of ducks and frogs. Now he realized that his education had missed on one point, and for the first time in his life he thought of Montana as a State of some importance.

Flagstaff drew his slicker about him in the pelting rain, toed a stirrup, and swung into a wet saddle.

"He licked me," he muttered. "He beat me hands down." Then, as his spirit plumbed the depths of despair, something happened inside of him. A blazing anger swept him. "But I ain't cashed my chips on that hoss deal!" he cried savagely. "I gave my word to Tom Barry. No swollen river or forest fire kin make me break it."

Flagstaff gave his roan the steel and headed north along the bank of the swirling stream. His wounded pride made him ride behind boulders and brush to prevent Scrub from seeing him.

He felt like a hunted animal, and he sped north as if hounds were on his trail. Somewhere up ahead of him, the river would be shallower, and he could ford it.

It was night before Flagstaff found a wide sandy bend. Dreadfully fearing quicksand, which had prevented him from wading as a boy in the San Juan River of Arizona, he crossed the stream.

He reckoned that he was at least sixty miles or more north of the road to Gun Creek. The country was so mountainous that he couldn't trust his roan to travel in the dark. He found a cave, nursed some wet sticks into flame, and dried his clothes from the rainy day.

The next morning, Flagstaff was up with first gray streak of dawn and found a clear sky. The flashing colors of the sunrise gave him

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hope. Saddling up, he struck due west through the canyons and valleys.

A plan was forming in his mind. Why turn toward the regular road into Gun Creek, which Scrub Reed would reach that day? What good were both of them in that town?

Perhaps Paisano had gone to Gun Creek and left. Perhaps he wouldn't be there for weeks. Tom Barry's predictions might be wrong.

"I stand a better chance lookin' for Paisano's hide-out," Flagstaff said, drawing Barry's map from his pocket. "It's marked here, about a hundred miles north of Gun Creek. Barry said he wasn't sure, but the hidden valley must be somewhere in that big patch of territory." Flagstaff pointed to a circle on the map.

The thing for him to do, he told himself as he spurred on, was to keep west and not turn north toward Paisano's stamping grounds until he, Flagstaff, was on a line that ran north and south from the hidden valley region to Gun Creek. Then he could turn north, and he might catch Paisano coming down to Gun Creek.

In that unfamiliar country of peaks and dark timber, Flagstaff was forced to use the sun as his guide. Flat-walled ridges reared in front of him. He swung right or left to get around. Canyons spliced his through trail westward, and he slid his bronc down yard-wide ledges, then clawed up cliffs where the shale slipped out under foot and threatened to carry him to his death in a landslide.

He lost all track of mileage. By noon, he was positive that Gun Creek was due south, but he did not know how far away. His lean figure twisted in the saddle, and he gazed north in the direction where Paisano's lair might be. His gray eyes focused on lines of jagged mountains with no sign of passes.

"Let's go, pard," he spoke to his bronc, and reined to the north.

His route led into dense pines out of which flowed a mountain brook. Taking it easy, he followed the brook up through brush and crag to where it was born in an icy spring. Flagstaff stopped to drink and fill his canteen, then started the climb up ledge and shale to a narrow notch in the ridge top.

In an hour he was leading his horse by the reins between two narrow walls that gave passage across the ridge. The altitude took his breath. His feet burned in his high-heeled boots. His last thought was meeting a man.

He was well into the middle of the cliff-hemmed pass when two hard-faced hombres stepped from behind boulders and raised Winchesters into aim at his chest.

"Howdy, amigo," one of the strangers—a bow-legged runt with buckteeth—said. "Whar do yuh think yo're goin'?"

Flagstaff halted, the roots of his hair prickling. His right hand released the bridle rein with which he was leading his bronc.

"Don't try fer that cutter on yore right hip," the second stranger—a barrel-chested fellow with a mop of red hair—warned him. "Jest answer questions, an' yuh'll live longer."

A cold grin grew on Flagstaff's lips. His right hand halted in its slow movement toward his gun butt.

He straightened to his full height. This was not the first time that he had been halted in his travels over the back trails.

Twice he had been robbed. Once he had been a prisoner in an owl-hoot nest until he could prove that he was not a lawman. But now

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Flagstaff didn't mean to reveal his name.

His mind flashed back to Bitter Spring and that derringer shot through the stable window. He recalled that Tom Barry had said that Sky Hilling would warn every outlaw in Utah of the search for Paisano. And now Flagstaff wondered if these two gun slingers had been planted in the pass to stop him from getting into Paisano's lair.

"My name is Hong Wong Pedro de Baton Rouge Smith-Jones," Flagstaff drawled in a disarming tone. "I've jest stepped off the last stage from South America, an' I'm heading toward Alaska to sell ice cream to the Eskimos."

The two toughs stared at him in astonishment. Then fire sprang into their eyes.

"Funny, ain't yuh?" the barrel-chested redhead snarled. "Yuh ain't walkin' toward Alaska. Yo're hikin' right inter Boot Hill. An' yore tombstone will read: 'A lanky smart-Aleck by the name o' Flagstaff Martin, who was tryin' to kid somebody inter believin' he was a gent on the dodge."

The bow-legged tough cocked his Winchester. "I reckon it is him, Red," he chuckled. "He answers the description. Whar shall I drill him? Between the eyes or——"

The gunman didn't finish. Flagstaff Martin heard the same click of hoofs that stopped the speaker. Horses were coming into the pass from the north.

Flagstaff's eyes flicked past his foes to see down the narrow cliff-flanked alley. He saw a sleek white thoroughbred appear at the end of the pass. The sunlight played like a silvery stream on its bare back. The animal halted, and then a rider appeared beside it on an ebony-black bronc.

The rider was hatless, his shirt in rags. He was hunched forward like a hen peering curiously at a worm. His beaked nose was cherry-red. His cheeks were covered with white whiskers that gave the appearance of feathers. There was no mistaking the man.

"Paisano!" Flagstaff exclaimed, and as he did so, the rider whirled his black horse with the speed of magic.

A shrill birdlike cry echoed from his lips. It was a call to the saddleless white thoroughbred, which wheeled and darted after its owner.

Flagstaff didn't watch the horses vanish down the rocky slope outside the pass. His eyes flashed to the two toughs before him. He found them jerking their heads to see Paisano. Flagstaff lunged, his long arms spread out.

His hands whipped down, slapping the rifle barrels of the two gunmen earthward. The weapons exploded harmlessly into the ground.

"Look out!" the bow-legged tough exclaimed.

"I got him!" the husky redhead roared, letting go of his rifle to grapple with the Arizona cowpoke.

Flagstaff's long right arm curved upward with the speed of a lizard's tail. His right knuckles hit on the big redhead's jaw in a bone-crushing uppercut.

It was a blow that snapped the husky tough's head back on his shoulders and sent him staggering away on wabbling legs, until he lost balance and fell in an unconscious heap.

But the bow-legged tough had now let go of his gun and was swinging desperately with two fists at Flagstaff's ribs. Flagstaff grunted in pain and doubled over. He felt the runt smash him on the top of his head.

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Flagstaff's knees gave way and he went down. He knew the runt would be going for a six-gun now. He reached out with those long hands, grabbed for the runt's bow-legs, caught them, and jerked the tough off his feet.

He saw the little tough coming down to earth, dragging a .45 loose as he did so. Flagstaff's hand flashed out and slapped the man across the eyes, blinding him for that short second as he tried to take aim.

Crash! The runt's weapon exploded, with Flagstaff throwing himself aside to avoid the slug.

The bullet shaved his cheek. He twisted, and sent a wild haymaker toward the tough's face. The blow prevented a second shot and stunned the tough. Flagstaff was on top of him before he could get his wits. Then Flagstaff punched him into unconsciousness.

"Two out!" Flagstaff ejaculated. "One more to go."

He was on his feet with a leap. There was no sign of Paisano outside the northern entrance to the pass. Flagstaff whirled to his waiting roan, threw a leg over the saddle as he shouted for it to be on the go.

Like an arrow from a bow, the animal sped to the north side of the pass. Flagstaff was toeing the stirrups as the horse hit the rocky slope on the outside of the ridge.

Far below him, he could see a white bronc and a rider on a black darting through boulders and scrub pine on a valley floor.

"Paisano!" he shouted. "Wait up! I'm a friend, not an enemy."

His voice echoed and reëchoed across the lowland, but queer old Paisano raced on down the valley. It was a sight to watch him go. And Flagstaff almost forgot to guide his own roan in its plunging gallop down the slope.

He was marking the amazingly even strides of the white and the black. Those two animals never lost gait, no matter how many times they turned right or left. They sailed out of the western end of the valley, and Flagstaff was positive that Paisano was working around to get over the ridge through another pass.

Crack! A rifle shot drifted to his ears from the place where Paisano had vanished.

Flagstaff caught his breath. He heard another shot, another.

"Great guns!" the lanky puncher exclaimed, bending over the pommel. "The skunks have got all the passes blocked. Paisano has run into a trap. Come on, hoss!"

Before Flagstaff touched the floor of the valley, the shooting had stopped. Panic sent him to using a quirt on his roan for the first time in his life.

He was positive that the owl-hooters had bagged their man. Leaping fallen logs, skirting boulders, driving on at a loco speed, Flagstaff kept his eyes on the end of the lowland, where Paisano had vanished.

He was almost there when he heard shooting again.

"They ain't got him!" he cried.

At that moment a dazzling shaft of silver shot out of the pines at the valley's end. Flagstaff caught his breath. The saddleless white thoroughbred was headed toward him like a comet. The horse saw him and swerved to the north, vanishing into a clump of buckbrush.

Flagstaff spurred into the pines from which the white had come. The firing was up ahead of him on high ground. He could hear men shouting. His roan struck a rocky

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slope and went bounding deerlike out of the pines and to long reaches of slide rock.

Then Flagstaff could see the action. There was the beautiful black horse running loose on the side of the cliff. Near it a ragged figure was crouched behind a boulder. There was a smoking weapon in the man's hand. He was Paisano, and he was shooting first left and then right at two party of attackers.

"Yow-ee-ee!" Flagstaff yelled. "Hold 'em, boy. I'm a-comin' to help yuh."

Ripping a six-gun from his holster, Flagstaff saw Paisano rear up and turn to see him. It was plain that the queer old codger didn't know if Flagstaff were friend or foe. And as he hesitated about shooting Flagstaff, outlaw guns blasted from off to the left on the side of the ridge.

Flagstaff saw Paisano stiffen up. A scream echoed from the old fellow's lips. He spread out his arms as if to balance himself, then pitched forward, struck on the shale, and started rolling down the cliff.

"Skunks!" the Arizonian shouted.

Instantly his weapon was roaring vengeful lead at three shaggy heads on the slope to the left of Paisano.

As the attackers ducked to shelter behind rocks, Flagstaff leaped from the saddle and went scrambling up the cliff to reach the hombre who alone held the secret of the hidden valley where the thoroughbreds grazed.

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH RACE.

IN the Great Salty Bar in Gun Creek, Scrub Reed had been playing faro for an hour at the table where the man he took for Paisano was sitting. The young Montanan was using his head. That experience with the swollen river had taught him to go easy. He had sized up the saloon for what it was worth, and he didn't mean to show his cards to the tinhorn gamblers.

So he sat playing faro, watching the haggard wreck out of the corner of an eye, and listening to what the sharpers were saying to him. He heard the old fellow ask for a loan for the third time, and be turned down.

"Yuh've cleaned me out," the dirty, unshaven codger—really Sky Hilling—said drunkenly to the faro dealer. "Yuh got ter give me a chance ter win back."

Scrub bit his lips as the hawkish faro dealer answered:

"No more loans to-day, hombre. Go get another hoss to sell. I'll stake you to grub. I've already lent you five hundred bucks above what you lost."

Although Scrub did not know it, the faro dealer and Sky Hilling were taking plenty of time to play their act. There was no hurry. They might have been waiting for Flagstaff Martin to show up in town. Or they might have wanted Scrub himself to take the lead. Had Sky tried to force the act, Scrub might have become suspicious.

But the Montanan had every reason to believe that the unshaven wreck before him was Paisano. There wasn't the slightest resemblance between that fellow and any other hombre Scrub knew. The wreck's description and actions tallied with everything that Tom Barry had said. Scrub was growing restless. He was neither losing nor winning money at the faro game. He watched Sky bury his dirty face in his arms.

"I can't sell no more broncs," the

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impostor wept. "They're the only pards I've got in the world. I love 'em from the bottom o' my heart."

Scrub's hand crept to a gun butt as the faro dealer bent over the blubbering Sky.

"Hey, cut that out," the faro dealer snarled. "Stop squawkin'. Yo're drunk. Go on over in a corner and take a snooze. We can't have you breakin' up this game."

Now was the time for Scrub to act. His eyes turned to the faro dealer. "I'll take him away," the Montanan said in an innocent tone. "He makes me feel kind of sorry for him. I'll give him a little walk up the street to sober him up."

The faro dealer grinned. "Suits me," he replied. "Mebbe it will change your luck, cowboy. But don't pay no attention to anything he says. He's crazy."

Scrub got up as the other players laughed at the remark. He laid a sympathetic hand on Sky's shoulder.

"How about a little walk, hombre," the Montanan suggested. "I'll be a pard."

Sky's tear-streaked face lifted. The gambler had been kept on the verge of intoxication for days, and his eyes were pink-rimmed. But his wits were as keen as a whip.

"A pard?" the impostor questioned dazedly. "Yuh mean yuh want ter help out a poor ol' man? I'll go with yuh, young feller. But I can't walk far."

"That's the stuff," Scrub chuckled as Sky struggled out of the chair. "Who-oa-oa, there. Not so fast! Let me guide yuh from behind. I'll steer yuh right to the swinging doors."

The bogus Paisano Smith staggered, braced up, and started marching across the floor, with Scrub behind him, ready to catch him if he fell. Belted and booted customers frowned as they passed. Then the same ones winked at one another as Scrub's back turned toward them.

"Be careful now," the Montanan warned his charge as they neared the exit. "Push the doors out with your hands."

He saw the swaying fellow lift his arms in obedience. As the doors were pushed outward, Scrub heard the thunder of hoofs in the street. He saw past Hilling and out to the hitch rail, where a rider was dragging a sweated pony to a plowing halt. Scrub noted that the rider stared at the half-drunken hombre lurching out to the plank sidewalk.

"Sky!" the rider yelled, not noticing Scrub. "We've got Paisano an' Flagstaff Martin holed up in a ridge. They're sending smoke signals for help. Git the gang. Scrub Reed must be near 'em."

This news robbed Scrub Reed of every spark of strength in his body. He froze, dumfounded, staring at the rider at the hitch rail. He failed to see the hombre whom he took to be Paisano straighten up as if jerked by an invisible hangman's rope. The next thing that Scrub knew, the drunken old wreck was off like a jack rabbit.

"Kill him!" the bogus Paisano yelled as he whirled around the corner of the saloon. "It's Scrub Reed in the doorway."

"Sky Hilling!" Scrub gasped, and his nerves snapped like bowstrings.

Sky was gone, but the rider at the hitch rail was a danger. Scrub's right hand flashed downward as he saw the horseman stab for a gun. Scrub's right wrist struck on the thigh, bounced off, with fingers clawing a .45 loose from his holster.

He ducked down and aside as he whipped the weapon into quick aim at the drawing horseman.

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Crash! Scrub's weapon spat fire as the rider was letting go on the trigger.

The Montanan's bullet knocked him clean out of the saddle. The rider's gun exploded as he went down, his horse reared, and bolted up the street.

At that moment, Scrub heard the shouting behind him in the saloon. He was not in the doorway, having dodged aside. But a hail of lead came sweeping from inside the bar and into the street, followed quickly by the rush of boots.

Scrub lost no time. He lit out up the plank sidewalk as if a swarm of hornets were after him. His six-gun flipped to the left as he passed the corner of the saloon, but there was no sign of Sky Hilling in a side alleyway.

Scrub did not halt to find the gambler. He kept moving for all he was worth. He saw the horse whose rider he had shot, trotting along with dangling reins. Scrub leaped from the sidewalk.

Behind him, guns blasted and lead screeched about his ears. He jumped and caught the saddle horn of the riderless bronc. A bullet from the saloon front took away his ten-gallon hat.

He sank in his spurs as he landed in the hull, then twisted, and blasted back at the crowd pouring from the Great Salty Bar.

There was none of Sky Hilling's regulars in that pack of rats in front of the saloon. They were hirelings to trap the rodeo stars. Scrub's lead sent them scurrying to safety. Some threw themselves flat in the gutter. Others dived back into the swinging doors. More darted behind other men to let them feel the smack of lead.

They were yellow to the core. Even the voice of Sky Hilling, who had entered the back door of the Great Salty and was now knocking out a window glass, failed to encourage them to fire at the fleeing Montanan.

Scrub was going like a comet, gun aloft and trailing smoke. He sent his last bullet behind him at Sky in the window, missed, then turned over the pommel and was taking the rocky grade out of town.

The bronc under him was not his pinto, and he felt the loss of a good horse's strength. The animal answered the spur, but its legs were weak. It couldn't take the steep trail on the gallop. So Scrub turned off to level going on the north.

The Montanan's mind was working like chain lightning. He still couldn't believe that the haggard wreck back in the Great Salty was Sky Hilling. But he had seen the fellow run at the sound of that name, and had heard him shout for the rider at the hitch rail to kill Scrub. What more proof was needed?

And the rider had said that Paisano and Flagstaff were holed up on a ridge, and that they were sending smoke signals.

Scrub's eyes focused to the north. "Could that lanky waddy be askin' help from me?" he asked himself. "Where is he? There's no smoke signal in the north."

Then Scrub remembered that his map told him that Paisano's hideout was north of Gun Creek. He also recalled that Flagstaff had refused to swim the swollen river. The only way that the puncher could have crossed was to ride northward upstream to a shallow ford.

"He must be due north," Scrub said, and glanced back to the town of Gun Creek.

There was a cloud of dust rising from the main street. Out of that

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cloud, Scrub spied riders striking his trail. The sun glinted on their rifle barrels and bridle rings. Their wild yips echoed to his ears.

"I must be going right," Scrub chuckled. "Or they wouldn't be so all-fired excited. Come on, yuh sway-backed crow foot," he spoke to the bronc. "Shake yore hocks like a Montana bronc."

The animal responded with a snort, as if it recognized a real rider on its back for once.

CHAPTER VII.

SMOKE SCREEN.

FLAGSTAFF MARTIN was holed up like a fox by a half dozen hounds. As he reached the unconscious Paisano on the rocky cliff of the ridge, outlaws had appeared at the edge of the timber where the Arizonian had leaped from his bronc. Those gunmen cut off his retreat down the shale to the bronc which might have carried him away.

With lead screaming at him from the timber line below and from rocky coverts at the left and right along the ridge, Flagstaff ducked into a shallow cut on the slope. There he laid the body of Paisano down.

He was temporarily safe from flying lead, but he knew that shortly the outlaw pack would send marksmen to the ridge above him. Then a withering fire would rain down into his refuge.

Flagstaff's first thought was for Paisano, the hombre who held the secret of the lost horse herd. The weird old fellow's eyes were tight closed, his mouth hung open, and above his right ear was a crimson line.

"Creased!" Flagstaff exclaimed. "Those skunks couldn't have done it on purpose. They meant to kill him."

There was nothing that Flagstaff could do for the man. Flagstaff's canteen was hanging from the saddle horn of his roan, which was running wild with Paisano's two thoroughbreds in the valley. It was better to let the grazed scalp flow for a time to eject any poison.

Flagstaff reloaded the empty chambers of his six-gun, and crawled up the side of the cut to have a look-see at his foes. Removing his hat, he built up a stone rampart with loopholes, then raised his head to a crevice to spy out to the left side of the slope.

Not a hundred yards away, he discovered the glint of a rifle barrel pointed in his direction. Flagstaff ducked and crawled to the other side of the cut. There he repeated his performance in building a rampart. Spying through a loophole, he saw a shaggy head lifting rattlerlike from behind a boulder not far away.

"The snake figures he'll wiggle up this way," Flagstaff growled, cocking his weapon.

Cool and sure of himself, the Arizonian cowboy waited as the shaggy outlaw began inching through the crags toward him. Flagstaff waited until the fellow suddenly spied the glint of his gun leveled through a loophole in the rocky rampart.

He waited longer than that. He gave the coyote a chance to either duck into hiding or to try to shoot. The outlaw chose the latter and stabbed a weapon into quick aim.

Flagstaff triggered with the accuracy with which he had put a slug through the O in Wyoming on that trail sign back at the Utah border. A howl of pain told him that he had not missed.

Flagstaff didn't wait to see the outlaw throw up his arms and go

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rolling down the slope. Instead, he ducked across the cut to take a look-see into the valley below.

"That puts one o' the coyotes out o' the scrap," Flagstaff was saying, when he heard a groan.

His hard eyes turned to Paisano, who was stirring on the bed of tumbleweed and leaves that had blown into the bottom of the cut. Flagstaff crawled to him. The old fellow's eyes fluttered open and stared at him in abject terror.

"Nothin' to be scared of, hombre," Flagstaff said. "I'm yore pard. But we've got a passell o' wolves hemmin' us in. Rest easy. We might not be livin' much longer, so don't waste yore last minutes by tryin' to argue with me."

Paisano's body went rigid with terror.

"Who are yuh?" he cried. "Yo're a lawman. Yuh've been huntin' for me. Yuh shot me."

Flagstaff pressed a hand against his ragged shirt to push him back to the ground. "I ain't no lawman. I'm just a buckaroo who wants to buy out yore hoss herd. It was a gang of outlaws who shot yuh so yuh couldn't sell it to me."

"Buy my beauties!" Paisano cried, teeth bared. "Not to any man. Yuh'll never find 'em. Yuh kin shoot me, but that won't do yuh no good. Them hosses are all I have in the world."

Flagstaff lifted his head to listen to the lead whining over the top of his hiding place.

"Listen to that," he growled. "Them skunks has got us cut off from getting down to the valley, where we would stand a chance of picking up the broncs an' beating it. It won't be long before one o' them climbs up on top of the ridge. Then he'll start shooting down at us. We're goners, Paisano. Yuh'll never see that hoss herd ag'in. But do yuh know what will happen to 'em?"

Paisano's eyes widened in terror. "What will happen?" he gasped.

"Just what's been happenin' to the cayuses yuh've gambled away," Flagstaff replied in a disgusted tone. "The hosses yuh sold are dead. The tinhorns sent 'em to the rodeo tracks an' ran their hearts out. That's why I wanted to buy yore herd. There's one o' the finest men in the world sendin' me to yuh with a noble proposition. He'll pay anythin' for yore stock, so that the gamblers won't get 'em."

A groan escaped Paisano's lips, and he dropped his head to earth.

"I couldn't help sellin' my broncs, one at a time," he said. "I had to eat. I tried to win 'em back after I sold 'em. I'm weak, jest as weak as I was years ago. It's the hand o' fate. I can't let my broncs go. I couldn't live without 'em."

Flagstaff's cheek muscles hardened. "Yuh wouldn't have to leave 'em, hombre. Mebbe my rich friend would want yuh to stay with the herd an' guard 'em for him. Yuh wouldn't have to live like a coyote any longer."

Paisano reared up, listening to the smash of bullets on the stony ramparts. "I can't go back to civilization," he said desperately. "Mebbe it is better that I die." He fastened bitter eyes upon the Arizona puncher. "I'm wanted, hombre. That's why I always sneaked into a different town fer supplies. I've been hidin' from the law fer twenty years. It ain't no harm in tellin' yuh that now. We're both goin' ter die."

Flagstaff bit his lips. He had met outlaws before, but never one so pathetic as Paisano. He could see in the old wreck's face a hunger for friends and the small luxuries of

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ranch life. In Paisano's freedom, he was no better than a prisoner, hemmed in by gray mountain walls, tortured by loneliness, condemned to suffer for a crime of his youth.

"What did yuh do, hombre," Flagstaff asked quietly. "Mebbe it could have been fixed up some way. Mebbe my rich friend could have got a pardon. Yuh've done a lot for the West in saving those fine hosses."

"Nobody could get me a pardon," Paisano said mockingly. "I shot a sheriff, young feller, an' I stole his hoss. It was my old weakness. I fell in love with that hoss. I bred it into the thoroughbreds that I found in the mountains where I fled. I reckon yuh could say that my herd doesn't really belong to me." His palm lifted to his head. "Did they crease me?" he chuckled harshly. "Now they're goin' ter kill me, eh? That's fate, hombre. Yuh see, I never killed that sheriff, either. I jest creased him. An' he's still lookin' for me."

Flagstaff's heart caught in his mouth. His memory caught spark. He had a mental picture of Tom Barry standing before him in the stable in Bitter Spring. He recalled that the cattle baron had once been a sheriff, a gun-fighting sheriff, whose draw had been beaten by only one man, a man that Tom Barry had sworn to settle with some day. There was a scar on Barry's temple, left there by a bullet fired by his old enemy.

"What was the name o' that sheriff?" Flagstaff demanded.

"I ain't tellin' yuh," Paisano replied. "Mebbe he's dead, mebbe he ain't. When I die, I'm leavin' my hosses to him, or to his heirs. So yuh see, no other man in the world could buy my broncs, not for any money. I'm ready to kick the bucket now. There's a will signed an' sealed in a bank in Cheyenne. When I'm proved dead, that will is goin' to be sent to that old sheriff or his heirs. It carries a map showin' the way to my hide-out."

Zing-g-g! A chunk of lead went through the top of Flagstaff's hair, missing killing him by a fraction.

His eyes jerked to the top of the ridge above him, and were just in time to see a puff of powder smoke blowing away from the cliff rim. The owl-hooters had got above him.

They were taking no chances. They were going to take their time about drilling him. Perhaps they were going to try to make him bolt from his fort in the cut, then let their henchmen bag him on the open shale.

Flagstaff's veins chilled. "That looks bad, hombre," he said to Paisano, cocking his weapon. "Yuh better forget about that will now. Drag a gun loose while I keep watching the cliff rim. Yuh better try a bit of shootin' along the slopes an' into the valley."

He heard Paisano get to his knees. "Death!" the old fellow cried in terror. "I'm goin' ter cash my chips. I don't keer. The will is made. But I've got to leave proof fer the bank that I'm a corpse. We've got to git out o' hyar."

Flagstaff grinned coldly, keeping his eyes focused on the cliff rim, where a rifle barrel might appear any second. "We might make it if we held out until night. One of us might get through, but not both. Those skunks on the ridge have the upper hand."

"No, they ain't!" Paisano cried. "If they didn't see us, they couldn't shoot us."

"But they kin see us by jest leanin' out over the rim."

Flagstaff heard Paisano sweeping

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up the tumbleweed and dry leaves in the bottom of the cut.

"A fire!" the old man exclaimed. "We'll build it on the edge o' the cut below the cliff rim. The smoke will hide us. They'll shoot down into the smoke, but they'll have to kill us by chance."

Flagstaff whirled. "By golly!" he exclaimed. "I should have known that a slick fox like yuh would think of somethin'. No wonder yuh've fooled so many hoss hunters. Git that fire goin'. It'll screen us from the cliff rim."

CHAPTER VIII.

PAISANO'S SACRIFICE.

SCRUB REED was riding like a bobcat atop a panic-stricken deer. To the north of him he saw a cloud of smoke rising above the top of a ridge. A mile behind him, a dozen horsemen were quirting frantically to overtake him.

He was using quirt and spur, goading his bronc recklessly through draw and vale, up rocky rises and down into gullies where the brush tore his shirt to ribbons.

"Don't falter!" he yelled to the blowing cayuse. "If it's the last race yuh ever run, give the best. Yo're fightin' for your own kind. Yo're fightin' for the best hossflesh in the West."

There was a high-powered rifle in the saddle boot. Scrub drew it as the swaying mount plunged into a vale and sped across. The ridge was before him. He could spot a narrow pass off to the left, another one off to the right. But high up on the ridge, his sharp eyes caught sight of two men watching his approach with rifles in their hands.

"They ain't that bean pole from Arizona an' Paisano," Scrub gritted. "They're bushwhackin' skunks."

His cayuse hit the rise at the ridge's bottom. It could no longer gallop. Heaving like a bellows, the horse broke to a trot, then a leaping walk, climbing desperately.

Scrub sprang from the saddle to make better time on foot. His long gun was cocked. Scrambling up the shale, he watched the two skunks on the ridge top.

Smoke was rising behind them, so the Montanan figured that if Flagstaff and Paisano were on the other side of the mountain, then they couldn't see their enemies.

"Hey, down thar," one of the hombres above shouted to Scrub. "Who are yuh?"

"Who aire them other riders comin'?" the second fellow called.

Scrub did not reply. He was within fifty yards now, good rifle range. He held his weapon ready to whip to his shoulder. The grade was steeper. In a moment he would be climbing up the last crags.

"Stop or we'll drill yuh," the huskier of the outlaw pair yelled from the ridge. "Yuh look like Scrub Reed ter me."

Scrub halted. "I am him, yuh ugly, barrel-bellied son of a polecat!" he yelled defiantly.

His rifle sprang to his shoulder as the big skunk swung a long-gun into aim.

Wham! Scrub fired as he saw the smoke from the husky's barrel.

The Montanan was using a high-powered hunting rifle. That fact saved his life. His bullet was quicker. From the smashing sound of the husky's gun, Scrub knew it was an old home-loaded Sharps buffalo gun. He saw the big tough stagger, and at the same time the fellow's bullet whistled past Scrub's cheek.

Now the second outlaw was darting back into hiding, too late for

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the Montanan to shoot. Scrub sprang for the crags, levering a fresh shell into his hunting rifle.

"Yow-ee-ee!" the young Montanan screeched. "Powder River! Let 'er buck."

The fighting cry of Scrub's stamping ground no sooner died away than an answering yell came floating from the other side of the ridge:

"Ee-ee-ee-yaw!" It was the old rebel yell of the Civil War South.

"Flagstaff!" Scrub exclaimed, grinning. "The ornery rattlesnake."

He was nearing the top of the ridge, eyes peeled for sign of the outlaw who had fled. A flash of precaution compelled him to halt. He knelt, picked up a handful of gravel, and tossed it ahead of him over the rim of the cliff about ten yards to the left of where he was going to appear.

As the gravel struck, Scrub leaped over the top of the bluff. He caught a bow-legged hombre in the act of lifting a rifle from behind a stone to cover a spot ten feet farther away from Scrub.

Crash! The Montanan fired, slamming a sharp bullet through the bow-legged maverick's right shoulder.

A scream. The outlaw staggered back, dropping his gun. He seemed to fall right into the smoke that was billowing up behind him. He yelled again and vanished from sight. Scrub could hear his body go smashing down the crags on the northern side of the ridge.

"Flagstaff," Scrub Reed shouted, "how many tinhorns are up here?"

"Scrub!" the Arizonian's voice called back. "There's two. I'll put the fire out so yuh kin see. There's at least five more o' the scum holdin' me an' Paisano from below here."

"I'm notchin' my lead-chucker fer them first two," Scrub called. "Put out the fire, an' let me add up the score with a few scalps from them Injuns below."

He turned, cast a glance at the still body of the husky redhead whom he had downed first. Then he sent his eyes to the south, where a dozen riders were approaching the bottom of the ridge. He waved his hand to them.

The horsemen drew to a halt, guns in their hands. A blast of fire sprang from their weapons. Scrub grinned. The range was too long. He turned and went to the northern cliff rim, where the smoke cloud was blowing away.

Now, gazing down into the valley, he saw Flagstaff and Paisano on their hands and knees in a small cut. They waved their arms. Scrub cocked his weapon and peered at the boulders off to their right. He saw two ragged toughs gazing up at him.

"Howdy!" Scrub shouted. "If yo're chilly down thar, I'll send a bit o' hot lead ter warm yuh up."

His rifle no sooner swung into aim than the outlaw pair darted from cover like frightened wolf cubs. They went springing down the rocky slopes with howls of terror. Scrub glanced right, to a spot beyond Flagstaff's fort. He saw an outlaw running desperately along the shale to get out of range.

"Let 'er go, Flagstaff!" Scrub yipped, and swung over the cliff rim. "Fog 'em out o' the brush on the valley floor."

This invitation was unnecessary. Scrub saw Flagstaff's tall figure spring out of the cut like a young doe. There was a blazing weapon in Flagstaff's hand.

Scrub watched him go racing down the shale slope toward a line of trees and brush, where powder

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smoke puffed from behind trunks. He saw Flagstaff stagger once, hit by lead, then he kept on, yelling his rebel fighting cry.

"That's nerve!" Scrub exclaimed, sliding down the rocks to reach the shale slope. "I'm a-comin', Arizona!"

Flagstaff vanished into the trees before Scrub reached the edge of the hole where Paisano was crawling up the shale rim. The old codger was panting hard. His lips twisted in a grin, and Scrub halted.

"I'm plumb sorry that I couldn't do much," Paisano groaned. "Yuh see, I got drilled in the left side by a chance bullet not long ago. It ain't nothin' ter speak of. Jest yuh go on after that Flagstaff hombre."

Scrub bent over the shaking old-timer. "We go on!" the Montanan exclaimed. "Nothin' doin'. I'm takin' yuh with me."

Scrub leaned to grab him by the chest. Stocky and strong as a young bull, the Montanan swung Paisano from the earth and hung him across his right shoulder. Then, picking up his rifle with one hand, Scrub started down the shale to find Flagstaff in the timber.

A shout echoed from the brush. Scrub heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. A tall rider broke out of the trees, chasing a beautiful white bronc and leading a black thoroughbred by a bridle. It was Flagstaff, with a crimson-stained neckerchief tied about his left thigh.

"I caught 'em easy," he shouted. "One snake tried to stop me, but he's wishin' he hadn't."

Scrub halted, eyes hardening. He didn't know what to expect from Flagstaff, and he wasn't going to take any chances. If the lanky puncher had found Paisano, Scrub certainly wasn't going to give the horse breeder up. The Montanan had fought for Paisano. He'd do it again. Jaw thrust out, Scrub waited for Flagstaff to come up and reveal his hand.

Paisano stirred on Scrub's shoulder. "Put me on the black," the old-timer said huskily. "I want one more ride afore I cash my chips."

"Yuh ain't cashin' no chips today," Scrub snorted, watching Flagstaff swinging painfully down from the roan's back.

"Thanks for the help," Flagstaff said coolly, his lean face a mask. "Is the fight over? Most of the scum that run into the timber are dead. The others will keep runnin' from now until next Christmas."

Scrub bit his lips. He recognized no offer of truce in Flagstaff's tone.

"There's twelve riders on the other side o' the ridge," the Montanan said tartly. "They might come through that pass off to the west any second. We better clear out o' hyar."

Paisano stirred again on Scrub's shoulder. "Put me on the black," he pleaded. "I kin ride. I've told Flagstaff about the will. Yuh boys kin git away. My life ain't worth nothin' no more."

Scrub glanced at Flagstaff, who slowly turned and prepared the beautiful black horse's stirrups and reins. The Montanan stepped to the animal and hoisted Paisano aboard. There, the old-timer grabbed the pommel with one hand. He swayed, caught himself, and gritted his teeth. A sheepish smile was on his lips.

"Yuh said a dozen men are comin' through yonder pass?" Paisano growled. "They're the ones that killed my broncs. Boys, don't forget my will. I'll make things easy for yuh to git away. Adios!"

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Before Scrub could catch the black's bridle, Paisano had kicked the thoroughbred in the ribs with his heels. Trained to the utmost degree, high-strung, and with tempered muscles, the cayuse bolted like a ball from a cannon. Its tail flicked Scrub's cheek as it passed. Then the animal was speeding up the shale at a long angle toward the western pass on the ridge.

"Stop him!" the Montanan cried. "It's shore death for him." And he sprang to the bare back of the white thoroughbred.

He saw Flagstaff swinging into the saddle of the roan. They were off on the race together, their broncs' hoofs scattering shale. Up, up, and up, they pounded, neck and neck.

Ahead of them, Paisano was leaving them behind as an antelope shakes off the pursuit of the hounds. And yet Scrub knew that he himself was traveling an up grade faster than ever before in his life. The white bronc under him took the slope as an ordinary mustang would run level ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, Scrub saw that Flagstaff's roan could not stand the pace, strain as the animal might. There was will in Flagstaff's roan, but not the strength to accomplish. Scrub saw his rival's horse stumble, try to regain footing, and go down, catapulting Flagstaff from the saddle.

There was no time for Scrub to stop. Ahead of him, Paisano was vanishing between the narrow walls of the pass. Scrub gritted his teeth, ready for the sound that was bound to come when Paisano met Sky's hirelings coming through the defile.

First it was the rocking roar of six-guns. The shriek of wounded men. Then came the crash of bodies and the squeal of horses.

"Blazes!" the Montanan cried. "He's ridin' the gang down."

The next moment Scrub's white thoroughbred had reached the entrance to the narrow defile and was racing through.

The first sight that met the Montanan's eyes was that of a pile of broncs struggling between the narrow cliffs in the very center of the pass.

Some of them were down and kicking. Other horses were struggling to their feet, and biting at a big black animal that reared and struck out with its front hoofs.

On the back of the thoroughbred was Paisano, clutching his saddle pommel with one hand, and using his other to gun-whip the heads of half a dozen uninjured hombres who were trying to drag him from his hull.

"Skunks!" Scrub yelled, spurring his white on.

His shout drew the attention of the six toughs from Paisano. They whirled, stared at his charge. They were hair-raising odds. Scrub could not shoot for fear of hitting Paisano.

Nor did he give the six a chance to fire at him. He drove the white thoroughbred straight at them, and as they dived right and left to get out of the way, Scrub threw himself bodily from the white's back at the nearest pair of toughs.

The Montanan was no lightweight. His headlong dive knocked those two nearest huskies sprawling back against the struggling heap of downed horses, where they were kicked insensible.

Scrub himself fell short of the pile of thrashing animals. Before he could get up, the four other gunmen sprang at him. He met them with a smashing left fist and a chopping gun barrel in his right.

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His knuckles bashed into the ugly face of a redhead; his six-gun barrel knocked aside a blazing weapon in the hand of a jagged-toothed runt. Then they were on him, clubbing, kicking, clawing him.

In the howling bedlam, certain voices were caught by Scrub's ears. He detected Paisano crying out in an agony of helplessness. He heard the shouts of more gunmen crawling out of the heap of downed horses and coming to join the four men on top of him. Then, the shrill yell of Sky Hilling sounded near.

It was Sky's hateful yell that lent Scrub the desperation of a cornered grizzly. His knees were on the ground. Fists and gun barrels hammered his back and skull.

He hunched his back, getting one foot onto the ground. Brain whirling, eyes filled with exploding balls of fire, he rose up as if lifted by some hidden force in the earth beneath. He was carrying two men on his shoulder, and he shook them off like puppies from a bulldog's back.

Before him stood Sky Hilling, shouting madly and stabbing a .45 into aim at him. There was a six-gun in Scrub's hand, a gun he had yet to fire in this battle. He had been saving the loads for this very moment when the crooked gambler would be within range. Perhaps it was too late. Perhaps Sky was taking too much time to aim.

Scrub did not waste the precious second in cocking his gun hammer. His right hand whipped up, throwing the barrel into line with Sky's body. His left hand came across to the right at the same instant. The palm of his left hand flipped back the hammer in the manner of a gun-fanner.

Crash-sh! Scrub's weapon was spitting flame as the first red spark spat out of Sky's gun barrel.

The Montanan's bullet was first, staggering the gambler even as he fired. The shock of Scrub's lead was what threw Sky's aim out of kilter.

The gambler's bullet went wide of the Montanan and found a target in the body of another hombre who was leaping in to clout Scrub over the head.

"Ee-yaw-aw!" Now the rebel fighting yell of Flagstaff Martin was ringing into the pass from its northern end.

Scrub heard it as he saw Sky Hilling fall among the kicking broncs. There was the roar of Flagstaff's gun. Scrub whirled, and he found his former foes falling like scythed grain from the cutting lead that swept up the pass from Flagstaff's weapon.

"We got 'em now!" Scrub roared, and he hurled himself upon a big redhead who was trying to leap to safety behind a dead horse.

He caught the gent known as "Rip" around the waist, hurled him against the cliff. And as the redhead tried to club at him with a six-gun, Scrub uppercutted him senseless with a rock-hard left fist.

Then Scrub turned to find Flagstaff staggering up and pot shooting at three remaining gunmen who had got through the struggling pile of broncs and were fleeing to the southern end of the pass.

"Just scarin' 'em along faster," Flagstaff chuckled harshly. "The party is over, hombre. Where's Paisano?"

Scrub got to his feet, eyes flicking to the other side of the pass, where an ebony stallion stood stiff-legged against the cliff. Under the handsome animal's belly lay a whiskered hombre in a tattered shirt.

Scrub sprang to the still body of the old horse breeder. He knelt be-

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side him and began parting the man's rags. Paisano's eyes were shut tight, his mouth open.

"He's shot here, here, an' here," Scrub said.

"Vital places?" Flagstaff asked, bending to look.

As if in answer, Paisano's eyes opened. "The black!" he gasped. "Where is he?"

"Standin' right above yuh an' waitin', hombre," Scrub said. "Boy, yuh shore have courage. That hoss o' yores certainly stopped those other range critters in the pass."

Paisano closed his eyes. "The black had courage, not me," he whispered. "I was jest payin' the price of an old feud. Let me die, boys. Hoss thieves make good buzzard meat."

Scrub's eyes lifted to the lonesome eyes of Flagstaff Martin. They both swallowed hard.

"He won't die," Scrub said huskily.

Flagstaff lifted a hand to claw a shock of hair from his forehead. "I've got a story to tell yuh about him," he muttered. "We'll have to take him back to Tom Barry—the kind of a gent who can forget a long-past feud."

Scrub flushed crimson. "So could I, Flagstaff," he said. "I reckon yuh did beat me fair an' square fer that rodeo prize."

"No, I didn't, Scrub. It's yores. Look what yuh did."

Scrub shook his head. "How about fifty-fifty, pard," he said timidly.

Flagstaff's hand reached out to shake. "Fifty-fifty, Powder River," he replied.

RUNNING M

A WESTERN SCHOOLMASTER

When schools first came to Texas, teachers were hard to find. Most of the first comers to the frontier country were more expert with spades and saws and guns than they were with the pen and the spelling book. But some one was always found who could hammer a bit of "l'arnin'" into the unwilling pupils, who would have much preferred a shooting match to a spelling bee.

One of these teachers was given charge of a school in Jones Prairie. He was known as "Horse-eye" Allen. He used the hickory switch freely, and his fists sent many a boy home with a black eye and a sore head.

But one memorable day, Horse-eye made the mistake of jumping the wrong pupil. Said pupil went on the prod in a hurry, and when the fight was over, they took Horse-eye Allen to the doctor, the whole school acting as escort.

The doctor, a kindly man, removed three front teeth that were wabbling, pressed an eyeball in place, bathed all the cuts, and braced the teacher up with a good dose of redeye before sending him home. Again the whole school acted as escort.

The next day, Horse-eye departed for parts unknown and never came back.

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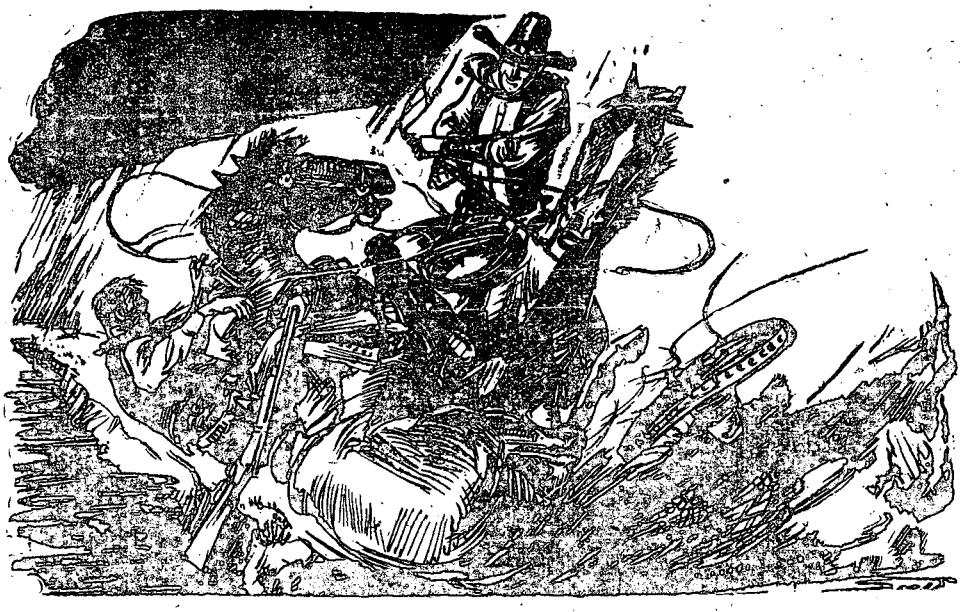

The Silver Skulls

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "Bud, The Giant Killer," etc.

THE Ranger started to check his horse, but the big roan did not need the pressure on the bit. Pepper had stopped of his own accord and was staring, with pricked ears, at the same object that had caught "Bud" Jones's attention.

A dead body, face down, floating with the current of the Rio Grande, flowing south—the boundary between the United States and Mexico—on its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

The sun had gone down and the new moon had risen. Its pale light glittered on a rounded object that shone between the dead man's shoulder blades.

Corporal Bud Jones, of Company F, Texas Rangers, was riding north along the beach. On his right loomed the limestone cliffs that marked the American side. In the narrow gulches between them many of the outlaws who infested the region lurked, with the narrow, shallow river ever handy for them to cross.

In bigger gaps there were fishing villages and the small river towns, all of them older than the American occupation of the Lone Star State.

The next village to the north was Tocino, one of the smallest, and with a bad reputation. The thirty-odd troopers of Company F had a wide territory to cover, and this was the first visit of any Ranger to Tocino. Bud did not expect to present

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himself as a Ranger. So he rode after dark and along the beach, hoping to enter Tocino unobserved.

The man in the water had been dead for some time. His body had sunk and risen again as the gases formed within it. Presently it would sink once more for the last time, to be sucked down by quicksand or devoured by the big catfish or the alligators of the lower waters.

Bud had night eyes. He was sure the dead body was that of a Mexican. But the glittering object aroused his curiosity. An eddy was bringing the corpse in close to shore.

Bud loosed his lass' rope from the saddle ring, made his loop, and tossed it deftly so that the noose sank into the water just ahead of the body, which was traveling feet foremost. He gently drew the corpse ashore and stranded it.

The rounded object was the knob on the hilt of a *cuchillo*—a throwing knife—that was buried to the guard in the dead flesh. It had been a perfect aim and a strong arm that launched that blade. It must be buried in the heart. It had gone through to bone and resisted Bud's effort to remove it.

He gave up the idea. The knob twisted slightly in his hand. He twisted it some more, and found that it screwed on to the head of the blade, that had been threaded at the tip for the purpose.

Bud held it free in his palm to examine it more closely by the light of the sickle moon and the stars. It was a skull, cast in solid silver, a ghastly if appropriate ornament for a killing knife.

It was about the size of a walnut. Its actual value was not great, for silver was common in western Texas. But the original had been molded by an artist.

Use had smoothed the soft metal, but every grisly detail was there, the hollowed eyes, the grinning jaws, the sunken pits and curves of the cranium.

The Ranger turned the man over. It was not a pleasant job but it was his duty. Fish had already nibbled at the features and left them unrecognizable. The hair was coarse and black, and there were gold hoops in the ears.

The clothes were those of a Mexican—not a peon, but wearing a *charro* costume of short jacket and pantaloons slashed below the knee. The shoes were Mexican sandals. All the clothing was stained and sodden.

The silver skull should be identification enough, Bud thought, and slipped it into his pocket.

He imagined the dead man was either a smuggler or a member of an outlaw band. The reason for his death might have been treachery, jealousy, or punishment. It was hard to tell and hardly worth while. He was dead, and probably the world was the better off for his riddance.

Bud had heard of the "silver skulls." Nothing very definite. It was hard for a Ranger to get definite information from Mexicans who preferred not to talk at all to a Ranger, or if they did, to lie to him.

It was said that a silver skull was the emblem used by an outlaw leader named "Esqueleto." "Esqueleto" means "skeleton." Bud supposed this bandit was a thin man. Some of the rumors said he always wore a mask.

Bud knew that his name was not set down in the private book of the Rangers—the "List of Fugitives from Justice"—that gave the descriptions of the "wanted" persons, of their crimes, and the rewards

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offered for them. But that did not make Esqueleto the less wanted.

It looked as if this dead man had been one of his followers. And as if Tocino was the place that Esqueleto made his headquarters for drinking, gambling, and dancing. Probably he had his actual hide-out close by, in some secret nook among the cliffs.

Bud finished his unpleasant task by picking up the wet, limp body, and carrying it to where a ledge in the cliff made a low and narrow cave beneath it. There he set down the corpse, piled brushwood in front of it, and walled it all in roughly with boulders.

He did not feel that he had any cause to avenge this killing. He washed his hands, rolled and smoked a quirly, and remounted.

The roan had stood patiently, well trained. Bud hauled in his rope, coiled it, and tied it to the ring.

He himself wore close-fitting clothes of tanned buckskin, fringed at the seams. He had high-heeled boots of soft leather, fancy-sewn, with silver spurs of Spanish shape.

On his head was a wide-rimmed Stetson. He wore twin cartridge-belts with ammunition for both the .45 six-gun at his right hip and the carbine in a saddle boot beneath his left thigh. To offset the six-gun, a bowie knife was sheathed on his left side.

His silver star, emblem of the Lone Star State, bearing the one word "Ranger," was pinned beneath the tab of his shirt pocket. A silk neckerchief was about his throat.

He made a fine figure as he sat erect, welded to the saddle on the splendid steed that Bud had chosen and bought with his own money, as did all Rangers.

Horse, twin cartridge belts, and carbine, to say nothing of the star, were give-aways. But he meant to leave Pepper, and one belt, the carbine, and the rigging, in some place where they would all be handy, and to investigate Tocino in the attitude of a more or less casual visitor.

He spoke Spanish so well as to pass for partly Mexican. It helped remove all suspicions that he was an ordinary gringo, suggested he was a free-lance bandit or smuggler, without further disguise.

There were always plenty of them roaming up and down the Rio Grande, sometimes boldly, sometimes furtively; sometimes flush, and sometimes looking for a chance to get hold of money by any means at hand.

Such people did not volunteer much about themselves. They were seldom asked questions.

A mile along the beach, Bud saw the dark opening of a narrow ravine ahead of him. It was a deep notch in the cliffs. Out of it, a small stream trickled across the sand to join the river.

For that reason Bud approached it cautiously, not slackening speed, but tightening his knees and gathering up the reins in a fashion that made the roan keep itself in hand for a sudden emergency.

Many places like this were choked with brush, waterless, and without a trail of any kind. The trail might be screened here, and there would doubtless be undergrowth, but water was a necessity for any bandit stronghold.

As he neared it, a rider came out of the dark slot and challenged Bud:

"Quien es? Amigo ú enemigo?"

("Who is it? Friend or foe?")

This man was not a highwayman, or he would not have asked a question. He was a sentinel, which was just as dangerous. Bud could have

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stalled, by proclaiming himself a friend, with a plausible story to follow, but the Ranger had a strong objection to telling a lie in any circumstances.

He did not want to trade shots that might bring down a dozen bandits upon him. It looked as if they were expecting trouble, or perhaps a run of contraband. At any rate, they did not desire strangers or interference.

Bud touched Pepper slightly with his rowels, and said nothing. He kept on advancing at the same pace.

"Halt, or I'll fire!" yelled the sentinel, in Spanish.

As Bud did not halt, the other suited action to the threat. He lifted his arms, and the Ranger saw the dull gleam of a carbine barrel as the man sighted along it. His reins were about his saddle horn.

Bud pressed in his knees, heeled the roan again, and leaned forward, low in the saddle, clinging to Pepper's sturdy neck as the troop horse charged, instantly gaining top speed.

The roan outweighed the mustang the other was riding by many pounds. It weighed as much as a three-year-old steer. It was grain-fed, Ranger-trained and groomed.

It struck the mustang on its shoulder with the force of an avalanche, and sent it sprawling to the sand, its rider pitching headlong without even having pulled trigger.

Bud went racing along the beach, Pepper's hoofs flinging up clops of sand as he galloped, mocking pursuit.

The bandit picked himself up, and spoke forcibly, without judgment or reflection. The barrel of his carbine was choked with sand, he was out of wind, his shoulder had struck a boulder and was bruised. His mount, not liking him overmuch, nor what had happened, trotted off a little way and refused to stand.

It was several minutes before he succeeded in catching it. Bud was long since out of sight. The sentinel sulkily remounted and started to clean his carbine, deciding to forget the incident, at least so far as reporting it was concerned.

He had a leader who did not tolerate mistakes. His name was "Esqueleto," and none of his band had ever seen his face. At any moment, a light might show across the river and would have to be answered to show that all was safe for a run of smuggled goods.

The man who had ridden him down in the face of gunfire was a devil, nothing less. Much better to forget the whole thing.

II.

Meantime the "devil," in the shape of Bud Jones, was riding up from the wharves and sheds of Tocino's landing, toward the lights of the village.

There were not many of them. Such a thing as street lights were not thought of. Lamps, lanterns, and candles provided what illumination was displayed.

He had come in by the back way. The narrow, steep, dusty street was deserted. He could hear the tinkle of a few guitars, a snatch of song from the *jacals* he passed, hovels of basketwork and brush thatch.

Opposite the *posada*, or inn, he turned off. There was a building there that seemed to have once been a warehouse. It was unused, part of its roof had fallen in, the rear door stood open. Bud had expected to find something like this. The river towns had many of them.

He led Pepper inside. The roan liked good things, but it was an old

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campaigner, not dainty. Bud had watered it, and now he gave it a measure of cracked corn. Pepper would stay until called for, and never give a hint of his existence.

Then Bud crossed the street, and passed under the archway that led into the patio of the inn beneath the second story.

The courtyard was paved, it had a sluggish fountain and a pergola covered with vines. This was the only entry into the inn, save for a door at the back, opening from the servants' quarters. An outside stairway, led to balconied sleeping rooms, a door on the left to the common room.

Bud entered. There was nothing luxurious about the inn. A bar, small tables, a faro layout, a dance floor with a small platform for musicians, a counter at the far end for eating.

There was no music now, no gambling. Such matters could easily be started if called for. This was the sort of place, Bud told himself, where the comrades of the man he had ridden down would come later, if things went well with them.

He wondered if they would be led by a masked, thin man, called "Esqueleto." He was anxious to make the bandit's acquaintance, though at present he had nothing but hearsay upon which to arrest him.

The big room was lighted by three overhead oil lamps with tin reflectors. There were some loungers at the bar, a few at the tables. Mostly peons, but not all of them.

The bartender was a villainous-looking Mex, fat and greasy. He squinted down his flat nose every time he served a drink or took in a coin.

They all looked at Bud as he entered and asked the bartender if he could have supper. He spoke in Spanish.

"You'll want a drink first?" asked the man. "I own this inn. I am Juan Alvado. I serve the best food and drink between El Paso and Laredo. Good brandy, señor."

"I do not doubt it," said Bud, knowing he was being listened to by everybody, "but I have made a vow. I have a mission to perform. Until it is accomplished, no strong drink may pass my lips."

It was a good answer, and a true one, though he did not explain that his mission would last the length of his enlistment as a Ranger, that he was vowed to rid the land of outlaws.

It made him a personage. Anybody who would take a vow like that was to be considered seriously.

"I understand, señor. You shall be served immediately with the best. Within fifteen minutes."

Alvado bellowed an order, and a *mozo* came from the rear, to whom he gave instructions. They sounded good to Bud, who was hungry.

"And your horse, señor?"

"I have left it elsewhere," said Bud.

It paid to be mysterious, to give out little information. Alvado said no more.

Bud was surprised to see an American at the bar—a man who looked like a settler, the frontier type that brought a family out to the Far West, forerunners of civilization and progress.

He had sold garden truck to the hotel and was waiting for his money. He seemed impatient, but held himself in. No doubt he had learned that gringos were disliked in Tocino.

Alvado went back to this man and started to dispute the amount to be paid. The American stood out for his rights.

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Next to him, three Mexicans started what seemed a friendly scuffle. They bumped into the gringo, and the man nearest him apologized. That was not a usual thing, and Bud's eyes narrowed.

Then Alvado suddenly agreed to the price and paid it out in silver dollars.

"You must bring me more corn and vegetables, señor, when next you come to town," he said politely. "You grow them *muy bueno*."

That too was curious. The man seemed relieved. He put away the money in one pocket, groped in the other, as if for his pipe.

Suddenly his jaw dropped. His healthy tan turned to a sickly gray. Bud saw sweat on his brow. And he saw that they were all watching the gringo, some of them covertly grinning, like a pack of coyotes.

The settler straightened and went out to the patio. But his shoulders sagged before he passed the door. Bud eyed him. The man was afraid, in deadly fear, though he tried not to show it.

And the source of his terror had come from what he had found in his pocket, something that had not been there when he arrived.

Bud followed him, though not with any apparent purpose, sauntering toward the patio as if for purely personal reasons. One of the men who had scuffled made the same move. The Ranger turned at the door, and looked at the Mexican with eyes that had frosted.

"Were you trailing me?" he asked coldly, still in Spanish.

The man muttered something, turned off, and went up the covered stairs to the second floor.

The settler had stopped under the arch. There was a lantern there, and he was examining whatever he had taken from his pocket by its light. He closed his fist upon it as Bud came up.

"Looks like you found something in your pocket you wasn't expectin', leastwise you wasn't too glad to find, partner," he said.

The settler looked at him in surprise. He had taken Bud for a Mex.

"It ain't anything you could help me with," he said dully.

"Would this make you think any different?" Bud asked him as he flipped up the tab of his pocket, and showed his star. "Let's you an' me talk this over somewheres not quite so public. Only you'll have to make it short."

The man's eyes had lighted up with a gleam of hope. He went with Bud across the road to the ruined warehouse.

"My name's Fuller," he said. "I hail from Kaintucky. Things wasn't so good, an' we come West, me an' my wife an' three kids. We located on Canto Crick on good bottom land. We've done right well, sellin' truck to the inn an' a couple of the stores. Done *too* well, mebbe. I still don't savvy these Mexies, 'cept that they call me a gringo an' have no use for me. You'd think I was the foreigner in my own country," he ended bitterly.

"We aim to make this territory plumb American," said Bud. "It's quite a job, but we're makin' progress. You're the sort of folks the country needs, an' we're back of you. Go ahead."

"I brought along three hosses, blooded stock," said Fuller. "Was goin' to breed 'em. I figured good hosses was worth money any place. They was too vallyble to leave behind. I ain't had to work 'em much. The soil on my place is soft an' rich."

Bud was beginning to see what had happened, but he said nothing.

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"Last week three Mexies come to our place, round dusk. One of 'em wore a mask. He was a thin man they call 'Esqueleto.' He told me, like he was doin' me a favor, that mules was better fo' me than hosses. They had three scrawny critters with 'em, all spavined an' old. Said he'd taken a fancy to my hosses, but was willin' to trade even."

"I've heard some of Esqueleto," said Bud. "Those men who hustled you at the bar are tied up with him, I reckon. It was one of 'em dropped whatever it was into your pocket. Was it a silver skull?"

Fuller stared at him. Then he unclosed his fist and displayed a skull, much smaller than the one Bud had, but just as perfect.

"You know what it means?" he asked. "There's a Mexie woman my wife nursed when she was sick. She told us. It means you got twenty-four hours to git out. I laughed at him about the hoss trade, of course, an' he laughed back. 'Take a week to think it over,' he says. 'If you want to swap leave the hosses at the livery in Tocino. Take home the mules. Otherwise, you'll hear from me. I suppose you want to keep healthy an' happy. My name's Esqueleto. Folks'll tell you about me.'"

"You afraid he'll take your hawsses?" asked Bud.

"I'm feared of more than that. He'll take 'em, burn down my house an' barns. My wife's scared to death of him, the way his eyes looked through the mask. I don't feel like knucklin' down to any outlaw, mister, but I got my family to think of. I've heard from him, all right. They'll likely come in the night. Likely to-night."

"You won't have to quit," Bud told him. "I'll see to that."

"Where's the rest of you?"

"Headquarters twenty miles, nearest trooper round ten."

"There's round a dozen in his outfit, they say."

The Ranger laughed. "There's only one Esqueleto. Tell me just where to find your place. I'll be along later. Might be quite late. If you hear an owl hoot three times, that's me. I've got a notion Esqueleto will be here to-night to meet his men. Now you vamose, Fuller, an' don't let your wife worry."

III.

Fuller went to where he had left his wagon and Bud strolled back to the inn. Alvado met him in the patio.

"Señor, I was worried. The food is ready. It is hot. I was afraid you would let it get cold."

"I was just lookin' round a bit," Bud told him. "I do not drink, as you know, Señor Posadero, but perhaps you will do me the honor of sitting with me and drinking a bottle of your own wine, at my expense."

Alvado said he would be honored. There was another man already back of the bar, no more pleasant-looking than his boss.

As he drank his wine, Alvado tried to get some hint out of Bud as to why he had come to Tocino. He evidently considered that Bud was mostly Mexican, if not entirely.

The last thing in his thoughts was that Bud was a Ranger. Alvado even brought up the topic. The Rangers he said, were a nuisance, they interefered, they were bullies and enemies of the people.

Bud let him rave on until the bottle was finished. Then he said:

"Do you, señor, know anything, ever see anything, of one Esqueleto?

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I had an idea he might be found here, or not far away."

Alvado shot him a look of suspicion from his squinty eyes that narrowed as his face took on craftiness.

"How did you get that idea, señor?" he asked.

"It might have been whispered to me," said Bud. "It might have been by the wind, or the whisper might have come through the mouth of a skull—a silver skull, Señor Alvado."

The face of the *posadero* changed. He laid a dirty finger alongside his ugly nose.

It seemed that the silver skull was a sort of talisman, it might be used as an emblem of acquaintanceship, as well as for a threat. The mention of it was a sort of password. That had been Bud's hunch, and he had played it.

"You will perhaps have more to say to Esqueleto when you meet," said Alvado. "He may be here tonight. Some of his men are here now. Others will come, if all goes well."

Bud translated the last four words into meaning "if Esqueleto is successful in what he has on hand." No doubt a smuggling run. Also Alvado's earlier sentence suggested that there had to be more than talk of silver skulls to gain Esqueleto's confidence. It was an introduction, but not a security of friendship or trust.

Some of the peons left the inn. Alvado whispered in the ear of others who seemed disposed to linger. The *posada* was being cleared for the entertainment of the bandits.

Five men stayed and started to play monte. Alvado took the cover off the faro layout. Bud amused himself with solitaire and cigarettes.

Close to midnight, six men came in. Bud thought one was the sentinel he had downed. The man looked at him hard. Five were clad much as the dead man in the river.

The sixth was a mysterious figure all in black—sombrero, clothing, boots, sash, shirt and serape. They were made of suède leather for jacket and pantaloons, wool for the serape, silk for the rest. Jacket and sombrero were ornamented with silver filigree.

The strangest thing about him was that he, and he alone, was masked. The mask was of smooth leather, fitting closely to the upper part of his face, falling in a fringe that reached below his chin from below his nose. Black eyes glittered through slits.

He stared at Bud as Alvado whispered to him, then nodded carelessly and called up his men to the bar. He did not include Bud.

Alvado might have told him about the vow. Bud thought that Esqueleto regarded him as a possible recruit.

They all took tequila except the leader. Alvado set a bottle of brandy in front of him. He poured out a full glass and downed it like so much water, drinking back of the fringe of his mask.

His men were in merry mood, inclined to make a night of it. The run had been a good one. They wanted music, dancing. Alvado promised to send out and procure partners for them.

Esqueleto spoke, and his voice sounded as hollow as if it came from a skull: "I have work for some of you later. Those of you who were waiting here. Don't forget that."

They listened to him with respect. He was plainly their master. They kept on drinking. Liquor was taken to the monte table, to the faro layout. Esqueleto watched, and at last

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came over to the table where Bud shuffled his cards.

"I heard you asked for me, señor?"

"Señor, I have heard of you. I was anxious to meet one who is so well known," Bud replied.

The black eyes gleamed through the mask. Esqueleto was considering the noncommittal answer.

"Do you ever play *veintiuno?*" he asked.

They started playing. It was simple enough. The dealer gave out an open card to his opponent, dealt one face down to himself. All picture cards counted as tens. The idea was to accept cards to the limit of *veintiuno,* or twenty-one. The nearest to that number won. With ties, the dealer took the stake.

The luck seemed to run against Bud. Esqueleto, dealer most of the time, had nimble fingers. Bud knew he was being cleverly cheated. He said nothing, and smiled when he lost. Esqueleto was trying him out.

"That is all I have to lose, señor," said Bud presently. A Ranger did not have much spare cash at any time. Esqueleto looked with contempt at what he had won.

"Something else beside money, perhaps," he suggested. "A watch or some trinket?"

"How about this?" Bud took from his pocket his skull and set it on the table. Esqueleto started, his eyes were blazing.

"Where did you find it?" he demanded.

"On the beach. The man who had it did not seem to have any more use for it."

"What happened to the rest of it?"

"You mean the blade of the knife? The man still seemed very much attached to that, señor."

"Who are you?"

"You may call me Carabina, señor."

Bud could not read the hidden features. He had made his play. Either he was going to gain the confidence of Esqueleto, or he would be defending his life in another few seconds.

He was prepared for either.

"Give me that skull," said Esqueleto hoarsely.

"Pardon, señor, I found it. It is mine. You have not yet won it."

There was a shout at the monte table. The players were going to the bar to drink the health of the winner.

Bud could feel the rage back of the mask, like fire from a closed stove.

"*Caramba!*" snarled Esqueleto. "Give it to me, you spying dog."

"So then," thought Bud, "it is war."

Esqueleto's left hand grasped the skull. Bud's left hand closed down on the other's wrist, vised until the bandit's fingers spread with pain. Esqueleto's right hand shot toward his belt, swift as the dart of a lizard.

It was not fast enough. Bud shucked his six-gun in a dazzling flash of speed.

"Don't try it, señor," he said. "I might have to damage your own skull."

He picked up the silver emblem, took the money out of which he had been cheated, stuffed all into a pocket and backed from the table. It was close to the door to the patio, close also to the bar.

The drinkers saw him. Esqueleto shouted to them to kill the spy. Bud saw the barman snatch a gun from under the counter.

The Ranger picked up a chair by its back and flung it. At the same time, he fired and shot out the three lamps in three shots. There was the

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crash of glass as the bottles and glasses were swept clear, and the lamps went out. There was the smell of hot oil and gun smoke.

A knife sang over Bud's head as he ducked in the doorway.

"First one shows his nose outside in the next five minutes gets its shape plumb ruined," he said. "The spy, Esqueleto, is a Ranger! *Hasta la vista!*"

Then he was gone. He ran across the road. A minute more, and he was galloping down the dusty street, leaving confusion and rage in the *posada*. With Pepper stretched out in his top gait there was no chance of any one following him as he made his way to Fuller's farm on Canto Creek.

The silver skull was still with him.

IV.

The quivering hoot of an owl sounded three times, and a light showed in the Fuller farm house. Fuller had built it well back from the road. A lane led to it and the outbuildings, and this was well fenced with posts and poles. On either side there stretched well-tilled fields.

This was the kind of citizen the land wanted. This was the kind it was going to have, Bud told himself.

He rode up the lane, and hooted again. Fuller came out with a lantern in one hand, and a shotgun in the other.

"It's the Ranger," Bud told him. "We've got an hour or so, I think, but we'll want to make the most of it. Have you got staples and baling wire?"

"Plenty of it, mister. You must come in and meet my wife and the kids."

Mrs. Fuller was still young, plucky enough, though she admitted fear of the masked bandit.

The eldest was a boy of eleven, excited and eager.

"Gee, ma, let 'em come, now we got a Ranger with us. That's what I'm goin' to be, when I grow up."

Mrs. Fuller did not seem to think that Bud was very much grown up himself. But she had heard that most of the Rangers joined when they were still well in their teens. And when she looked again at Bud's resolute face and heard his plans, she stopped worrying.

A younger boy, and a girl, were asleep. Mrs. Fuller could handle a rifle and had one of her own. Fuller had both rifle and shotgun.

"The boy can have the scattergun," said Bud. "He can fire it in the air, anyways."

"I kin shoot a rabbit on the dead run an' birds on the wing," cried the insulted youngster indignantly.

"All right, bub," said his father.

"If things work out right," Bud told them, "there may not have to be much shootin'. I figure on them comin' along a little before it's gettin' light. Lot of Injun in all the Mexies, an' they use Injun tactics. Most folks are sound asleep an' hard to wake, round that hour. My captain calls it the dead hour, when every one is weakest, body an' mind. An' they'll likely be lickered up. They'll come kyutin' an' a-whoopin'."

He did not tell them anything about what had happened at the inn. It did not seem necessary to him, and he did not want to waste time.

A third of the way up the lane, toward the road, they drove staples into ten posts, opposite each other on both sides. Then from staple No. 1, on the left, they stretched bale wire six inches off the ground,

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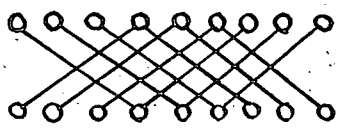
bringing it taut to staple No. 4, on the right. Then 2 back to 5, and so on to 10. They reversed the process from right to left.

The result was a lattice of wire stretching twenty feet or more across the lane—a stout crisscross of wire that could barely be seen, that would be less visible after the moon was down, and the stars dim, at the coming of the false dawn. The entry was more open. It was a perfect trap for excited riders.



As a precaution, he had Fuller take his horses from the barn and hide them in a grove some distance down the creek, haltered and hitched, up wind from the approach from Tocino, far enough away so there would be no danger of their whinnying. They were beautiful animals, and he did not wonder at Esqueleto's wanting them.

It was the bandit's cool attitude of being the ruler of the region, able to take anything he wanted, especially from gringos, that irked the Ranger.

Also, he wanted to take Esqueleto in the act. Not being "wanted," so far Bud had nothing but hearsay concerning his crimes. No doubt they were many, including killing.

He posted Fuller and his wife in the bushes back of the fence, left and right. They left the boy, much to his disgust, to guard the horses, with Bud finally persuading him of the importance of the task.

Bud himself, as commander of the garrison, meant to remain mounted on Pepper. He had a good layout, but it might take bluff to put it over.

It was just after the boy reluctantly left them that Bud caught the sound of hoofs coming from Tocino. The roan confirmed it. The noise of galloping came louder. Bud gave final instructions.

There should be six of the bandits, including Esqueleto. It was hard to count them as they wheeled from the road into the lane.

As Bud had thought, they were drunk, sure of getting what they wanted, filled with hatred against the settler, his wife and children.

They yelled threats of what they meant to do. They fired their weapons into the air as they came at racing speed down the lane. They were not afraid of any interference.

Esqueleto did not lead them. He meant to make sure of what he wanted, the fine horses, from which he could raise others. Bud saw his masked face, with the fringe flapping in the wind of speed, as the riders ahead, quirting, spurring, shouting, but now holding their fire, entered the trap.

Then they were fairly in it. The horses' feet were in the wire meshes about their fetlocks. Every step led to the confusion. A horse went down, then another, pitching their riders into the net on all fours. Some tried to turn and bolt, but they were in the net.

Amid snorting horses, scrambling hoofs, and thrashing legs another man fell.

Bud shouted his greeting.

"Welcome, hombres! Ranger talkin'. Quit, or die. Give them a volley over their heads, comrades, just to convince 'em."

He had shucked his carbine from its boot, and he fired it as Fuller and his wife discharged theirs, Bud winding up with a shot from his six-gun.

The fifth man, still in the saddle,

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flung his weapon away, his arms in the air, convinced a troop of Rangers had caught them. The others, crawling in the wire, cried for mercy. They were almost sobered, and they were quitting.

But Esqueleto, not yet in the trap, whirled his horse about, and fled. It was a powerful brute, a black. With his own black outfit it made a poor target, almost invisible.

Bud squeezed Pepper's withers, leaned forward.

"Over, old-timer," he called.

Fuller and his wife would cover the Mexicans, collect their weapons, see to their surrender and safe keeping. The horses, trembling, now got to their feet and stood still, afraid to move, sensibly accepting the situation.

Bud had led Pepper earlier close to the fence, letting him figure it out. And now the roan sailed over it, landing in full stride, stretching out in pursuit of the masked bandit.

Esqueleto was first into the road. He swung away from Tocino, and Bud followed. It was a close race. Presently the superior stamina of the roan would tell, but the black, ridden with quirt and spur, held its own.

Esqueleto knew where he was going. This Ranger had outfoxed him so far, but he had a trick or two of his own. There was a place where he could cross the creek, where there was quicksand.

Unless one knew the bed, calamity was certain. For a while, there was rock, and then that solid bottom ended abruptly. A sharp turn to the right, and then to the left, meant safety.

Beyond, there lay the mountains, dense chaparral first, then forest.

All he had to do was maintain his start. Let the Ranger play him for a coward. Once across the creek, he could let his pursuer blunder into the quicksand and either let him go down as he taunted him from cover or shoot him through the head and rescue the horse.

But the big roan was beginning to gain, coming closer and closer. Esqueleto drew his *cuchillo*, turned in the saddle and flung it. Bud was crouching in his saddle. He guessed what was coming, but he could not dodge the flying steel that came like an arrow.

The blade slashed into his shoulder, grated against bone. Bud hauled himself back into his seat, sick with the nerve shock. He fired in self-defense.

He saw Esqueleto reel in his saddle, then straighten and swing the black off the road, down a slope to where the creek was beginning to show gray in the beginning of the dawn.

The black had been cruelly treated, its flanks were ripped, its mouth torn, and tongue cut by the Spanish bit. It fought as Esqueleto wrenched it aside. It was still fighting when they splashed into the creek.

Esqueleto had been hit in his bridle arm, above the elbow. It gave way, lost control, and the maddened black slid off the solid footing into the quicksand.

Bud reined up Pepper on the bank. He saw what had happened, what he had escaped.

It was his left arm that was injured. He did not need hands to manage the roan, only his knees and voice.

The black was floundering, sucked down, and sinking fast. Esqueleto screamed to Bud to save him. It was too late for the horse, but Bud freed his rope and flung the loop unerringly to settle about the bandit's

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shoulder, beneath his arms. He took his dallies, and gave Pepper the order.

He could not see a man choke to death in the quicksand. Esqueleto might die of lack of breath, as he deserved, but it would be on the gallows, with a noose about his neck.

He dragged the bandit out to the bank where Esqueleto lay still, one arm twisted beneath him. He seemed to have fainted.

As Bud stooped to loosen the rope, Esqueleto snatched a small pistol from its special pocket, low down on his left leg, and fired point-blank at the Ranger.

Bud felt a rib give way. He drew his six-gun and shot back. The heavy bullet crashed into the bandit's brain. His back hooped upward convulsively on head and heels, then collapsed.

Bud soaked his neckerchief in the creek, and made a temporary bandage for his left arm. His side burned as he explored and found the missile had run round the rib, and stopped short of his spine. That could keep.

Dawn was coming now. The Ranger lifted the mask of mystery, and knew why Esqueleto had worn it always, why he had chosen the symbol of a skull as his emblem.

His face was almost fleshless. His nose was sunken. The dead eyes looked blindly out of deep sockets. The bony framework thrust out of the skin.

Bud took the silver skull from his pocket and set it into the right palm, closed the stiffening fingers about it.

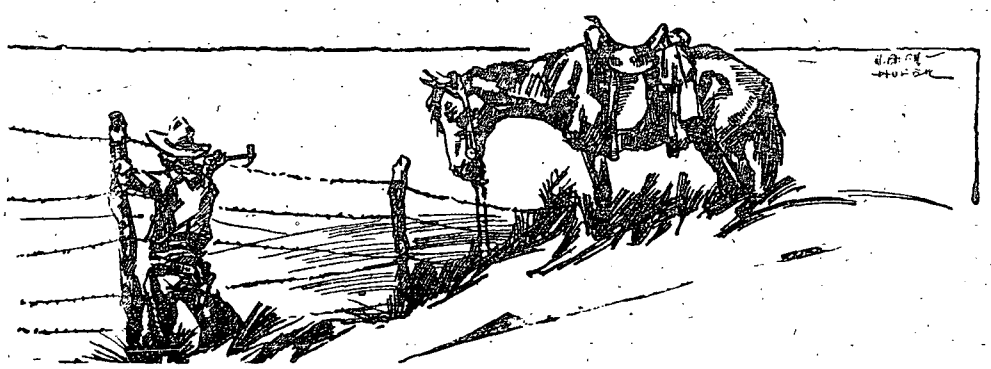
This was the end of Esqueleto. The rest of his hand would scatter and be finally rounded up. There were five prisoners who would squeal.

Bud mounted painfully, leaving the body where it lay. Fuller could ride on one of his to the Rangers' camp, while Bud questioned the Mexies.

"Shack along, old-timer," he said to Pepper. "I'm sort o' tired. You take over for a spell."

The roan felt its master's knees firm in the saddle and broke into an easy fox trot, heading back for Fuller's farm.

Bud Jones never was an hombre to git boogery at skeletons—livin' or otherwise. An' he shore cleaned up thet one. Esqueleto will never git inter the Rangers' "Book" now. But there are still a lot of other hombres in it, an' Bud'll start workin' on a few in his next story, which same will be appearin' in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly plumb pronto.



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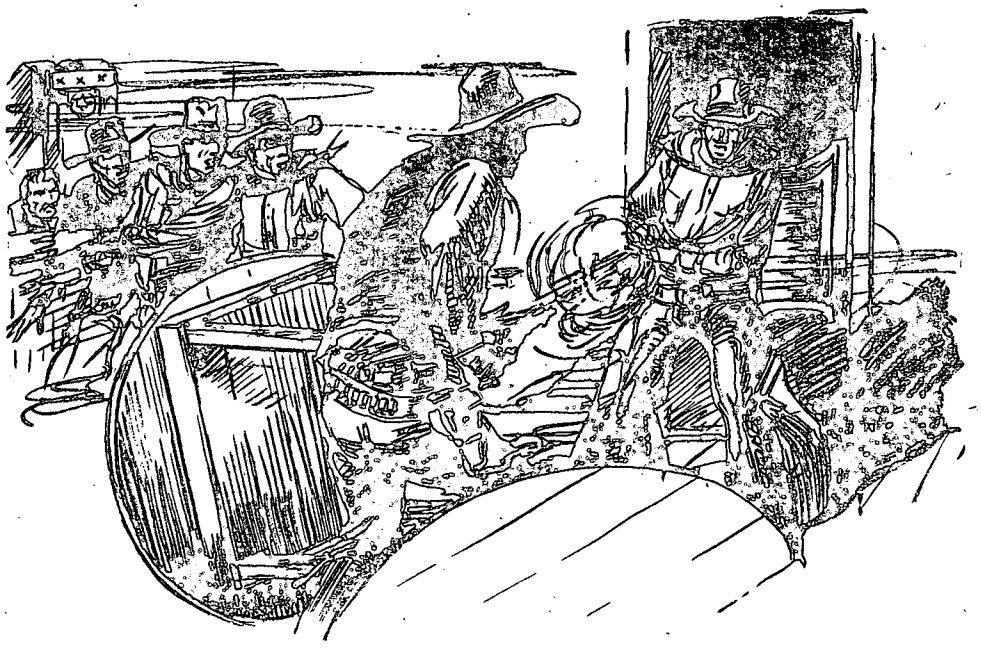

Gun Size

By Charles M. Martin

Author of "Hot Leather," etc.

HE jingled into Charleston on a big red horse, with the setting sun at his back. His stirrup straps were notched short enough for a ten-year-old boy, but the cowboys and miners looked over the little rider's rigging with range-wise eyes. It was top-hand gear in any country, except that Arizona discounted the silver California bridle chains.

The little man neck-reined suddenly and stopped in front of the Nugget Saloon. He was not much over twenty years old. His cold gray eyes were fastened on the face of "Sorrel" Williams. Williams was six foot and red-thatched, with temper and courage to match his hair.

The undersized cowboy loosed the split reins to ground-hitch his horse, swung his right leg over the cantle, and dropped to the ground with a little jump that cleared his horse and balanced him on the balls of his small feet.

A long-barreled Colt made his skinny right leg seem more spindly, but it matched the gun Sorrel Williams was shadowing with fingers of his big right hand.

"The name is Gun Size Tompkins, Sorrel Williams," he stated clearly, and his gray eyes bored into the narrowed blue between the big man's slitted lids. "Yo're a gun-sneakin', wide-loopin' rustler, and I'm standin' pat to back it up!"

Seasoned gun fighters stood still against the buildings of the narrow

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street and held their breath. Sorrel Williams was fast with his guns, and the big man had never eaten dirt during his two years in and around Charleston.

The little stranger would be just one more notch on the handle of the gun slinger's iron, after which all hands could go get their interrupted suppers.

The big red horse jingled its California bridle musically, and Sorrel Williams shook his big shoulders in an effort to come out of his daze. His blue eyes opened wide while he stared down at the little man, and his deep voice was hoarse with surprise when he postponed the issue.

"Why, yuh little banty! I'm givin' you half a minute to tell these gents you made a mistake. Speak her big, little feller, before I flips my hand!"

"Gun Size" Tompkins didn't bat an eye. He braced himself on the thin soles of his riding boots, with thin shoulders hunched over like the wing spread of a hawk. Deep wrinkles that never moved were etched deep in his thin tanned face, but the cold gray of his eyes bored and probed into the face of the gunman without winking. When the big red horse rattled its chains again, the little man's mouth made a straight gash in his face.

"Time's up," he snapped. "Flip yore hand, you dry-gulchin' killer!"

Sorrel Williams seemed to lean forward while he stared at the poker face in the shadow cast by the big red horse. His right hand flipped down without warning, jerked up with calloused thumb dogging back the filed hammer. Up to now, Sorrel Williams had never shot second.

The little cowboy matched him, move for move, until it came to the jerk that would spill the gun barrel across the worn lip of his holster. Then he buckled his knees against the pull, and the molded holster jumped down and away from the long barrel that flamed into sullen thunder under the drop of the hammer.

Sorrel Williams jerked back and swung to the left when the heavy slug battered against his breast bone. His big feet moved to keep his balance while he tried the old border shift. The gun flipped from his right hand toward his left, caught the notched handle, and thumbed desperately to beat the follow-up shot he knew was coming.

Gun Size Tompkins watched, with small head cocked to one side under the shadow of his ten-gallon Stetson. The heavy gun bucked viciously in his hand when he slipped the hammer, and he smiled crookedly for the first time when the big man triggered a slug into the ground before crashing forward on his face. He held his head sidewise while he watched the thrashing boots vibrate before the long legs stretched stiffly.

"Was it a fair shake, gents?" he asked softly, and turned his cold gray eyes to stare at the amazed faces along the street.

Hostile eyes dropped as clutching hands fell away from gun butts. Feet shuffled restlessly, but the cowboy held the drop with his smoking gun and continued to stare them down.

"He shot an ol' man in the back down on the trail," he said slowly. "Ol' feller by the name of Tompkins, who was bringin' some beef up to John Slaughter. The Apache Kid and Tag Tuttle was with him when they run off the herd. If you see either of them two fellers, tell 'em that Gun Size Tompkins is cuttin' their sign. Adios, gents!"

Two riders came up the street from the south and drew rein in front of the Nugget. "Tag" Tuttle

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stared at the body under the rail, and turned to his companion.

The "Apache Kid" was also staring at Sorrel Williams. He continued to stare when a slender man with a black bag walked from an office across the street and knelt beside the body.

"I pronounce this man dead from gunshot wounds." Doctor Blake leaned closer to examine the bullet holes. "Either shot was fatal. Who done this here killing?"

A tall man stepped out of the saddle shop next door to the saloon. A marshal's star rode his rusty vest, and both hands were hooked in his gun belt while he stared at the two horsemen and answered the doctor.

"Gent who called hisself Gun Size Tompkins did that," he announced clearly. "Rode in here on a big red hoss with silver chains. Texan, from the cut of his riggin', and he called Sorrel for shootin' a old cattleman in the back down the trail a ways."

"You should have arrested him," Tag Tuttle growled. "That's for why you wear that star."

"She was a fair fight, the way I see it," the marshal answered quiety. "The little feller called Sorrel a gun sneak and a rustler, and backed up his war talk by givin' Sorrel first try at his gun. And there lays yore pard, stiff as a tarp."

"Gun Size Tompkins, eh?" The doctor shuddered. "About as big as a small bar of soap, but chain lightning with his hardware. Sorrel was dead before he even started to draw his gun, but he didn't know it."

The Apache Kid was half Indian, but looked the whole piece. Now his black eyes were watching the marshal with an unblinking stare of hatred, but it was his white companion who took the play.

"She's yore job to bring this hombre in, the way I see it," the cowboy stated flatly. "That there's murder!"

Joe White shrugged carelessly and fingered his star. "Self-defense," he contradicted. "Besides which, the little feller left a message before he rode toward Tombstone."

"Tombstone, eh? What'd he say?" Tuttle asked curiously.

"Said there was two other men with Sorrel when he killed that ol' feller and run off a small trail herd. He named them two fellers, and said to tell 'em he was cuttin' their sign pronto."

"He was a dang liar, but what two fellers did he name?" Tag Tuttle sneered while he waited.

Marshal Joe White half turned before he answered. His right hand slapped down and came up filled with a .45 Colt when he faced the two riders, and his voice was savage when he spoke.

"He named the Apache Kid and Tag Tuttle."

Tag Tuttle continued to sneer and elevated his hands carefully.

The Apache Kid stared at the marshal without moving. Then he scratched the back of his neck carelessly with his right hand. There was a whir of sudden sound when a silver flash streaked from his jerking hand.

Marshal Joe White stepped back two paces while the heavy gun sagged in his hand and dropped to the ground. A throwing knife was buried to the hilt in his corded throat, and the Apache Kid continued his downward strike until his hand slapped the butt of his gun.

"That's what I think of the law we've got in these parts," he sneered softly, and watched the stricken officer coil slowly to the ground.

"You've killed the law!" Doc Blake muttered hoarsely, and knelt

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beside his old friend. His trained fingers withdrew the knife, but the doctor shook his head when a bubbling rattle ended the life of Joe White. "There's one will get you gents," he continued softly.

"Meanin' this here Gun Size Tompkins, mebbe," Tag Tuttle sneered. "What you reckon, Kid?"

The half-breed shrugged carelessly. "We go now," he answered briefly. "Mebbe so this little one wait for us in Tombstone."

"I'll send word down for Doc Turner to write you gents down on the books as deceased," the doctor snarled angrily. "Both of you is dead, and you don't know it!"

The Apache Kid spurred his horse forward and snatched the blade from the doctor's fingers. For a moment, he hesitated as if undecided whether or not to kill the medico. Then he gigged his roan savagely and rode down the street toward Tombstone.

"They have a man for breakfast there every morning." Tag Tuttle grinned wolfishly. "To-morrow mornin', you an' me will furnish the meat."

II.

Gun Size Tompkins stayed long enough in Tombstone to get his supper. The moon was just peeping out over the edge of the Dragoon Mountains when he rode through a narrow pass and stopped the big red horse while he scanned a broad valley of mountain grass. Cattle were grazing knee-deep, or bedded down to rest after the long drive—Texas longhorns from the Panhandle.

"That's them," he murmured softly. "T-in-a-Box on the left ribs, just like me and old dad burned 'em."

A horse had entered the pass and was coming toward the mountain meadow. The cowboy neck-reined behind a rock and waited.

In the moonlight, he looked like a very small boy who would have fitted better on a Indian pony, but the big red horse knew its master. Red River Red, they called that horse in west Texas, where all men spoke respectfully of his owner.

Gun Size waited until the single horseman loped through the pass. He kicked gently with his right spur to send Red River leaping out to bar the way, and his voice was a gentle pur when he reined down and spoke a warning.

"Don't reach yet, Tag Tuttle!"

The cowboy swore under his breath and then chuckled. "Just a dang kid," he almost shouted. "I come near drillin' you, button."

"I'm gun size," the little man answered grimly. "Big enough to take care of myself."

Tag Tuttle leaned forward for a closer look. Now he could see the danger in that thin face, could see the heavy gun tied low on the spindly right leg. He leaned back to stare at the little man while recognition leaped to his slate-colored eyes.

"Yo're Gun Size Tompkins!" he almost whispered. "The jigger what shot Sorrel Williams when he wasn't lookin', and then left word for me and the Apache Kid!"

"The same." The little rider nodded soberly. "Where at did you leave that redskin?"

"Apache went in to make a deal for these here cattle critters," Tuttle answered brazenly. "Only three hundred-odd, but we've got them sold at ten dollars a head, and no questions asked. Anything else you'd like to know before I rub you out and take that red hoss for my own saddle?"

The little man grunted. "You

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couldn't ride Red River if he was hobbled and hawg-tied. And you ain't got these critters sold, like you said."

Tag Tuttle grinned and scratched his head. "I never see you before," he admitted slowly. "How come we ain't got 'em sold?"

"I helped drive that stock up here from Texas," the cowboy answered quietly. "Left old dad and two boys with the herd while I rode on in to see John Slaughter. That's how come you not to see me when yore gang dry-gulched my old man back there on the trail!"

"Slaughter, eh? There's some talk about that ol' guy runnin' for sheriff, come election," Tag Tuttle guffawed loudly. "So he was goin' to buy up a little jag of beef like this T-in-a-Box herd?"

"Yeah." Gun Size nodded soberly. "I'm givin' him delivery tomorrow."

Tag Tuttle also sobered and became instantly alert, slate-colored eyes set narrowly to emphasize his flat, broken nose, thick lips drawn back to show yellowed wolf-fangs at the corners of his mouth.

"You ever hear of me?" he asked, and his voice was thick with anger.

"Plenty," the little man answered softly. "Two-gun man what don't know proper how to use either one. Six notches whittled on yore handles, and four of 'em shot in the back. Yeah, I heard plenty about Tag Tuttle, the rustler!"

"Them's yore dyin' words!" Tag Tuttle rapped down for his hardware.

The little man watched him, with his head cocked at that queer angle, like a terrier watching a cat.

Tag Tuttle found his grips, and started to draw on the up-pull.

Gun Size dropped his right hand and kicked his right leg down free of the stirrup. Again he made that smooth draw with the holster slipping away from the heavy gun frame, and the narrow pass was lighted red when the long-barreled .45 roared once.

Tag Tuttle grunted and lurched backward over the cantle of his saddle before his guns had cleared leather. His horse stood like a rock, with the split reins anchored to the ground.

The rustler bounced on his shoulders and slid to his full length, the back of his skull missing where the heavy slug had passed out after drilling a neat hole between his close-set eyes.

Gun Size Tompkins swung down and jerked the cinch on the outlaw's horse. He jerked the bridle loose and sent the animal into the meadow with a slap of his palm. He was humming tonelessly when he again mounted the big red horse and pointed back toward Tombstone.

"Bury me not on the lone prairie——"

The restless cattle heard his voice and bedded down to their sleep. The cowboy thumbed a fresh cartridge through the loading gate of his old Peacemaker. He was no bigger than a boy as he rode through the rows of tall stones, but as they said of him down on the Red River, he was gun size.

III.

Pianos were tinkling in the dance halls when Gun Size Tompkins rode up Allen Street and swung down at the O. K. Corral. Lights were gleaming from saloon windows along Tough Nut Street, and the little man stared at them before leading his horse to a box stall.

"Double ration of grain," he told the hostler. "I'll take care of my own ridin' gear."

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A tall man with a tawny mustache stepped inside the barn just as Gun Size finished rubbing down the big red horse. A marshal's star was on his worn vest, heavy .45 on his right leg, with a bulge under his left arm to tell a story about a shoulder gun, in case of emergencies. His voice was crisp when he spoke to Gun Size.

"I'm the marshal, stranger. I take it yo're Gun Size Tompkins, what helped bring that T-in-a-Box herd up for Johnny Slaughter."

"Right both times," the cowboy snapped, and his gray eyes were steady and cold. "You lookin' for me behind the star?"

Wyatt Earp shrugged, while a smile of admiration lighted his hard face. "No," he chuckled. "Just givin' you howdy, and thankin' you for helpin' the law stop that rustlin' gang. I heard about you and Sorrel Williams, over Charleston way."

Gun Size waved his hand carelessly. "He was just one of them three long riders," he answered softly.

"Yeah, I know," the marshal answered. "Just wanted to tell you that I'm lookin' for the Apache Kid for what he did to Joe Blake, after you left Charleston. Him and Tag Tuttle rode up to the Nugget, and after Joe gave them two yore message, the Kid cut down on Joe with a hide-out knife. Joe's dead."

The little man nodded sympathetically. "I knows how you feel, marshal. Them three killed my old man and two of my pards. They run off our little herd, figuring to sell cheap, with no questions asked."

"We'll mebbe get yore herd back for you." The marshal rubbed the grip of his gun. "That 'Pache Kid is a killer, and I don't aim to take any chances when I meet him and Tuttle."

"I got the trail herd back my own self," the Texan answered sharply. "And you won't be bothered none with Tag Tuttle."

"Whoa up a spell," the marshal breathed softly. "You tellin' me you done met Tuttle?"

Gun Size nodded. "Met him up in a mountain meadow over in the Dragoons," he answered quietly. "I found the herd bedded down, and then Tuttle come foggin' through the pass."

The marshal slowly sized up the Texan. Not more than a hundred and ten pounds, but his worn chaps and hand-made boots spoke of hard usage on the range. A gun belt snugged around his lean middle, with the tie-back strings thonged low around his right leg. And all the time, Gun Size Tompkins stared steadily with his cold gray eyes that seemed to look right through a man.

"Meanin' that Tuttle is dead," the marshal almost whispered. "And he was fairly rapid with either hand!"

"He was slow," the Texan contradicted flatly. "I dotted his eyes, and what brains he had came out through the back of his *cabeza*. Like Doc Blake said over Charleston way, you can tell Doc Turner to mark him down on the books 'deceased.'"

"That's two of them," the marshal murmured, "leavin' just the Apache Kid for me."

"Wrong again, but I'll make a bargain with you," the little man answered.

"Sorry, Gun Size," Wyatt Earp answered coldly. "I'm the marshal here in Tombstone, and it's my duty to get this killer. I'm tellin' you to lay off this war whoop."

The Texan stared coldly and hunched his shoulders forward. "You ain't tellin' me nothin'," he barked. "Them three killed my old man,

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and I taken up for him. They likewise rustled my dogies, and that means a killin', down in Texas."

Wyatt Earp tensed his big frame and held his right hand ready for a strike. For a long moment, the two stared at each other, each waiting for the other to move. Then a slow smile cracked the hard face of the marshal, and his voice was soft when he spoke.

"You said something about a bargain, Gun Size?"

The Texan relaxed with a shrug. "Was goin' to say that whichever of us finds that redskin first, that gent gives him a chance. We're both lookin' for him, and one of us will cut his sign."

The marshal stuck out his right hand. "Shake," he agreed. "But if you meet up with the Apache Kid, you want to watch his right hand. He packs more hide-out knives than a porky has quills."

Gun Size Tompkins gripped the marshal's big hand hard. "She's a bargain," he grunted. "I'll be seein' you, pard!"

The O. K. Corral was at the extreme end of Allen Street. The Birdcage Opera House was at the other end, with several saloons between.

High-heeling it stiff-legged down the winding street under the board awnings, Gun Size Tompkins slid through the doors of the Crystal Bar and placed his back against the wall.

Faro and roulette were going full speed, but the Texan shrugged his shoulders and left the saloon. Nearly midnight now, with the night life of Tombstone just beginning to get started.

At the Oriental Bar, Gun Size underwent a sudden change. His gray eyes spotted a man he wanted to see, and he walked stiffly across the long barroom and tapped a small, stocky man on the arm.

"Yo're John Slaughter I was talkin' to yesterday," he said softly. "It was about that little jag of T-in-a-Box beef we done brought up from Texas."

John Slaughter dropped his hand from the pearl-handled .44, nodded his head, and then signaled for a bartender.

"Shore, Gun Size," he boomed. "Step up and wet yore whistle!"

"Thankin' you kindly, but I ain't drinkin' now, if you don't mind," the Texan answered slowly. "You see, suh, ol' John Tompkins was my daddy. He was killed by rustlers yesterday while I was in talkin' to you about delivery."

Gun Size was talking to the cattleman, but his gray eyes were fastened on the dark face of a half-breed at the end of the bar.

John Slaughter followed his glance, lowered his voice to whisper a warning.

"Go easy, Gun Size! That gent is the Apache Kid. He's plumb sudden and deadly with his tools."

"About them cattle," the Texan continued. "You offered me twenty dollars a head for three hundred-odd. That still stand good?"

"Shore does, Texan," Slaughter answered slowly, and his weathered face was puzzled. "I thought you said the stuff was rustled."

"It was," the Texan admitted. "But I got that herd back to-night. One of them rustlers was a feller by the name of Tag Tuttle, but he drawed second against sixes full. Right now, the coyotes is eatin' off him, 'cause I left him right where he fell."

Men all along the bar set their glasses down and drew slowly back to the wall.

John Slaughter emptied his glass

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slowly and glanced into the back-bar mirror. He could see the Apache Kid standing with legs wide apart, and he knew that the breed had heard every word of the Texan's talk.

"Good luck, Gun Size!" Slaughter stepped back against the wall, with his hand near the pearl grip of his gun.

Silence fell for a long moment. Men held their breath, and the wheels stopped whirring at the gambling tables. The tinny piano became hushed in the back room, where short-skirted girls were dancing with cowboys fresh from the trails.

Now all eyes turned to watch the Apache Kid, who was staring at the Texan in the ten-gallon Stetson.

"You speak of Tag Tuttle, *hombrecito,*" the half-breed said softly. "He was my very good friend."

Gun Size ignored the word meaning "little man." He was balanced easily on the balls of his feet, with both small hands hooked in his gun belt. His mouth curled at the corners when he answered the Apache Kid.

"'Was' is correct," he agreed. "Yore pard made his pass back there in Mustang Pass, but I had him faded. Like I done said, right now he's lookin' up at the moon."

"There must be some mistake," the half-breed purred silkily. "Tag Tuttle was ver' fast with his guns."

"There was a mistake, but Tuttle made it," the Texan grunted, and his voice became sharp and clear while he stared steadily into the dark eyes ten paces away. "Yore pard made several mistakes all in one day. The first was when he rustled that T-in-a-Box trail herd."

The Apache Kid shrugged. "Mebbe so," he conceded. "These other mistakes?"

"Shootin' them Texas cowboys was another," Gun Size continued clearly. "After which, he was among them present when the town marshal of Charleston got rubbed out with a throwin' knife. The last mistake he made was when he tried to throw down on me with a brace of tools he didn't rightly know how to use."

The Apache Kid did not answer. His dark eyes burned savagely into the cool gray ones while he scratched the back of his neck. Before the hand could straighten out, a gun blasted from the back door and shattered the big hanging lamp.

Gun Size Tompkins went for his gun with the flash. Something tugged at his ear, and then whizzed by to ping into the door frame.

The Texan's finger tightened on the trigger and then relaxed. Men were shouting in the darkness as they rushed for the doors, and the Texan slid up the bar and made for the back. A heavy hand caught him as he was squeezing through the rear door.

"It's Wyatt Earp, Tompkins," a heavy voice whispered. "Did he get you with that knife?"

Gun Size brushed the tip of his left ear and looked at the crimson. The bartender was lighting an extra lamp, and he could see the knife sticking in the frame of the front door.

"Missed me." He shrugged. "Was it you that smashed that lamp?"

The marshal nodded. "He was around that corner yonder, but I could see him in the back bar," he explained. "So I shot out the light just as he made his throw."

"I figured him to make a break for the back door," the Texan answered. "He dogged it, marshal!"

Wyatt Earp tightened his lips. "I'll get him," he promised grimly.

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"I don't aim to go to bed until I run him down!"

"Might be he's headed back toward Charleston," Gun Size suggested. "Me, I'm goin' to turn in and get me some shut-eye."

"Thought mebbe you might want to go along," the marshal invited.

Gun Size shook his head. "Tomorrow is another day." He shrugged. "Be seein' yuh, marshal."

IV.

Gun Size watched the marshal mount a big roan and ride south toward Charleston. Then he almost ran to the O. K. Corral and saddled the big red horse.

Red River greeted him with a soft whinny of surprise when the cowboy bridled him with a straight leather headgear.

"Them silver chains is for a town hoss," the Texan muttered in the darkness. "We've got work to do to-night, ol' feller."

Heading straight north, he sent the long-legged animal toward the rocky Dragoons. There was a short cut through the Devil's Graveyard, if he could find it, and Gun Size Tompkins feared neither man nor devil. Racing like the night wind, he rode hard for an hour before reining down to listen.

The sounds of a running horse came toward Mustang Pass. The Texan walked his horse up the steep grade and entered the broad mountain meadow. The moon was fading rapidly when he turned behind a clump of rocks and swung to the ground. Death was riding up the trail to meet him, but he loosened his cinches and sent the red horse back among the rocks to graze.

Forgotten was the saddle gun under his fenders while he watched the narrow pass. A horseman rounded a bend, coming slowly. He could make out a roan in the half light, and he watched when the rider drew rein suddenly and leaned over to scan the ground.

"Dang!" the Texan murmured. "That redskin has read my sign like a book."

Down on the trail, the half-breed studied the ground knowingly. He measured the distance between hoof-marks, and nodded his black head. Then he slid from the saddle and led his horse off the trail.

"*Hombrecito,* he wait for Apache Keed in the meadow. Mebbe better when daylight come."

Gun Size Tompkins got the message as plainly as if he had heard the spoken words.

Settling his back comfortably against a lava rock where he could watch the trail, the cowboy smiled in the darkness and prepared to wait for daylight. He knew the border breed, knew that the Apache Kid would die rather than be beaten by a man half his size.

Two hours until daybreak, with the little herd of Texas longhorns going to the winner! Gun Size Tompkins sighed deeply and closed his eyes. Range-bred, he would hear the slightest sound even while he slept, and he would awake with senses instantly alert.

Down the trail, the Apache Kid was also dozing while waiting for the sun god to start a new day. In his savage heart he knew that one of them would never leave the meadow alive, but the Apache Kid had never been defeated. His people slept when they could.

The Texan stirred restlessly when the first fingers of light felt their way across the crest of the Dragoons. He came nimbly to his feet and stretched his muscles like a cat. The fingers of his right hand flexed rap-

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idly to restore circulation, and Gun Size settled the worn holster on his leg and loosed his six-gun.

Back in the meadow, the cattle were on their feet, feeding on the tall grass. Red River Red came from behind a great rock to nudge his master, and the Texan tightened his cinches and walked out into the open of the pass.

Nothing moved in the trail below, and the little man threw back his head and gave the war cry of the Comanches.

The Apache Kid stepped warily in the trail and answered with the savage cry of his father's people. Gun Size Tompkins watched for a moment; then he raised both hands over his head and began to walk backward.

The half-breed understood this perfectly. It was to be a fair fight between warriors, and his enemy would take no advantage.

The Apache Kid had also left his rifle back with his horse, and he began to walk forward with empty hands. His beady black eyes glittered, and then a sudden respect formed in his brain for this white man who turned his back and walked slowly out into the mountain meadow.

Two hundred yards from the pass, the Texan turned on his heel and waited. His thin face was set in a calm mask that showed no expression. Only his cold gray eyes narrowed slightly when the half-breed topped the rise and continued to approach. Both knew the way of Indian and white man; both knew the code of old Judge Colt.

Neither spoke as the Apache Kid tramped stolidly forward. He stopped when his eyes had measured ten paces, and Gun Size nodded approval. He had also figured the distance.

They stared at each other for a long moment of silence, each sizing up the fighting qualities of the other. The half-breed broke the silence first.

"You come," he said simply. "You stay here!"

"Quién sabe?" The Texan shrugged carelessly. "Who can say?"

The half-breed pointed to a crumpled heap scattered among the rocks at one side of the meadow—torn bits of clothing, with a white bone gleaming here and there.

"My friend Tag Tuttle," he grunted harshly.

Gun Size shrugged again. "The coyotes got him," he answered carelessly. "And he was yore saddle pard!"

The Apache Kid muttered and scratched the back of his neck.

Gun Size Tompkins hooked his fingers around the haft of a knife and drew it swiftly. He side-stepped like a shadow when the half-breed straightened his arm from the shoulder. Then the little man swept his own right arm forward with an underhand throw.

The breed's knife whistled past him like a silver bullet. Gun Size straightened up when the Apache Kid grunted. His own heavy knife was sticking in the rustler's left hand.

The half-breed reached out and withdrew the knife while his beady black eyes watched his enemy. The blade was driven clear through from the palm, but no expression of pain showed on his copper face when the breed dropped the knife and settled his feet.

"I could have sent that through yore black heart, but I fight the white man's way." A sneer of contempt was in the voice of the Texan.

His cold gray eyes probed the face

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of the half-breed. The Apache Kid shook his left hand and nodded.

"White man's way," he agreed calmly.

Without warning, he struck down for the heavy gun on his right leg.

Gun Size was watching him, with head cocked to one side like a terrier watching a cat. Only his gray eyes were glowing with a strange fire of calmness while he waited.

The Apache Kid gripped his gun and started the up-pull. Like the flashing strike of a deadly snake, the Texan rapped down for his gun and buckled his thin legs to throw the oiled holster clear of the frame. Thin wrist cradled against his wiry body, Gun Size thumbed the hammer and slipped it with the speed of long practice.

Red gunfire outlined his small, muscular frame against the pale light of the false dawn.

The Apache Kid grunted and stepped back three quick paces to keep his feet when the heavy slug shocked into his heart. The gun dropped from his hand unfired when his knees began to sag.

The Texan bucked the smoking gun down in his hand and watched, head cocked.

Beady eyes fixed unwaveringly on his small enemy, the half-breed took one step forward and died. He crashed forward on his face, a rattle in his throat.

Gun Size faced around when the sound of a running horse echoed through Mustang Pass.

Wyatt Earp threw himself from the saddle and stared at the dead man.

"You beat me to him," he whispered regretfully. "And him the fastest Colt hand in Arizona!"

The Texan nodded soberly and reloaded his gun.

"Down Texas way, we run to solid colors in both men and hosses," he said slowly. "But no matter what color they run or how big they are, if they pack an iron on their leg, they're gun size. Yere comes John Slaughter to take delivery of this little jag of T-in-a-Box beef!"

HC

WESTERN SPELLING

In the Southwest, a donkey was always a "burro." This hardy little beast of the desert and mining camps, the friend and companion of miners and desert rats, that would lead its master to a water hole when he was lost or was off the trail, was never spoken of as a donkey, or jackass.

One time, a man living in El Paso, Texas, sent a very fine specimen of the burro to a friend in Ohio.

At one of the transfer stations, the express messenger could not make his freight slip tally, so he wrote back to the previous station:

One bureau short—one jackass over. Your clerk had better take lessons in spelling. He doesn't know how to spell "bureau," but has written it "burro."

What the other freight clerk said when he saw that remark in regard to his spelling, has not been kept on record. This is to be regretted, for it is quite certain that his language was eloquent and to the point.

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The Crimson Serape

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Bullet Bait For Christmas," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SMUGGLERS.

THE secret of a glittering treasure lay concealed in the crimson serape on the old peon's counter. Time had stained its velvet folds and had erased the nap from the front seams, where Mexican hands had held the shawl drawn against the cold. In one place, there was a small round hole, as if made by a bullet; in another, a dagger cut.

But despite its age, one could still see woven into the serape in dull silver thread a series of Indian symbols. Those symbols made a crude map which told exactly where a fortune in gold pesos and flashing diamonds and sapphires and rubies might be found in the Big Grizzly Mountains.

At least, that is what a wrinkled peon shopkeeper was telling a walrus-mustached cowboy by the name of "Buck" Foster, who had always been an easy mark for accomplished swindlers.

"Yuh don't say!" Buck gasped, his big brown eyes bulging. "Why in tarnation don't yuh go dig the loot up?"

"Ah-h-h, señor!" the Mexican sighed in utter helplessness. "I am ready for the grave. My poor eyes see no farther than the owl in the

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daylight. My limbs tremble like the cedar. Have I your great strength and wonderful courage to fight the bear and the canyon cliff?"

It took Buck several moments to figure out that speech. He had recently come from Montana with the Circle J outfit, to buy feeder cattle in the Southwest, and he was unused to the flowery lingo of the border country.

"Ain't yuh got no pards what kin do the job?" he asked.

"I am friendless," the peon replied sadly. "There ees no one I can trust, unless eet be an Americano cowboy like yourself."

Buck's shoulders squared back, but not for long. Suddenly a suspicious glint sprang into his eyes.

"How come yuh by that thar thing?" he inquired coldly. "An' what's a Mex fortune doin' on Uncle Sam's range?"

The peon's swarthy face was the picture of astonished innocence.

"You have not heard of thee famous Ramos family who fled the revolution to thees country, weeth their gold and jewels?" he cried. "You do not know that they were foully murdered by the Yaquis? Thees serape, señor, belonged to Juan Bautista Arriaza y Ramos. Eet fell eento the hands of a Yaqui boy. He gave eet to me when I took heem eento my poor home because I find heem seeck een the gutter. He died een my arms, señor."

Buck's leathery cheeks colored in embarrassment for having questioned this aged peon, a complete stranger, who had enticed Buck off the plank sidewalks of Orahanna to look at blankets and baskets.

Had the Mexican tried to sell him the serape? No. Buck had spotted it on the counter himself and had asked curiously about the bullet hole in the shawl. And it was only upon the puncher's insistence that the peon had told the secret of the serape.

Now, Buck Foster made an awkward attempt to amend his breach of manners.

"I don't cotton ter Injuns," he said huskily. "But mebbe that Yaqui kid was better than most o' his thievin' brand." Buck's brows knit in a frown, and he massaged his poorly mended broken nose, then tweaked a bullet-lopped ear. "How would yuh like me ter go git that fortune fer yuh?" he asked.

"You, señor?"

"Oh, I got pards what I kin trust through fire an' brimstone," Buck quickly added. "I'm not so awful shore o' the chink cook in the outfit, but he ain't actually stole nothin' from me yet. Billy West, my boss, is as straight as an arrer. An' Joe Scott don't even try ter cheat at poker, though he did trick me out o' that last slice o' apple pie last week. But Joe don't mean no harm."

The peon was shaking his gray head.

"I am too poor to part weeth thees treasure for notheeng."

"By heifers, yuh'll be a millionaire in two weeks," Buck argued. "Mebbe yuh'd like a little loan ter carry yuh over. Thar's some talk o' my pards goin' grizzly hunting. I might take a little longer than necessary ter dig up the loot." And he fished into his bearskin vest for a wallet.

"I weel sell one-half interest for feefty dollars, señor," the Mexican said coolly.

"Fifty!" Buck gasped. "I'll be a horned toad if that ain't a powerful lot o' dinero. I ain't got it, hombre. Billy West paid me jest that this mawnin', but all I got left is forty-nine seventy-five. I spent two bits on a bottle o' perfume." He caught

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himself. "Don't think I use the stuff. I was goin' ter put some on Joe Scott ter-night, an' then accuse him o' flirtin' with a squaw."

"I weel take forty-nine seventy-five," the peon said quickly.

"Sold!" Buck ejaculated. "But jest a second, amigo. I want yuh ter explain a bit more about that map what's sewed inter this hyar thing. I ain't awful good at Injun pictures."

Ten minutes later, Buck Foster left the adobe shop, with the serape carefully wrapped up in old newspapers and tucked under his left arm.

Buck never suspected that the old peon had bought the serape for ten cents from a Mexican teamster who had found it in an arroyo near the border.

Now Buck was wondering if his boss would be sore at him for being late in keeping an appointment. He reached the double-logged calaboose and slipped in the front door, in the manner of a prisoner escaping a jail, and not that of an honest waddy entering one to call on the local lawman.

Inside the sheriff's office, near the front window, stood a clean-cut waddy in a gray beaver-felt ten-gallon hat, a yellow silk shirt, and batwing chaps. It was Billy West, who had lived half as long in this world as Buck Foster, but who knew about nineteen times as much about smooth-tongued strangers.

Billy was talking to a gray-haired lawman. When he saw Buck enter the jail, he called:

"You should have got here sooner, pard. Come over to the window. We're just about to have a look-see at a gent called 'Cato' Cassidy. He's goin' to come out of the Border Rest Saloon yonder."

Buck certainly wasn't interested in watching a gent called "Cato" Cassidy leave a saloon.

"Billy!" the walrus-mustached veteran said breathlessly. "I got somethin' awful special ter tell yuh. Kin yuh come out back o' the calaboose fer a second?"

The Circle J boss was looking out the window again. "It can wait, Buck," he replied. "The sheriff suspects this Cato Cassidy of bein' the leader of the border smugglers."

"What in tarnation have we got ter do with smugglin'?" Buck demanded in exasperation. "I got somethin' awful important on my mind."

Billy West cast a cool gray glance at his nervous top hand.

"Buck," he said seriously, "when I presented our letter of introduction from Ranger Captain Smith to Sheriff Ripley here, he told me a story that would make your hair stand on end. He figured that we were going grizzly-shootin' in the mountains and ought to be warned. I offered to help him out in a tough problem. That hunting trip of ours is now just a stall. We're goin' after smugglers in the Big Grizzlies."

The sheriff standing beside the Circle J boss interrupted by pointing out the window.

"Thar comes Cato Cassidy now, Mr. West. See him? He's the big fellar with the curly red beard an' the two guns strapped down. He's heap bad medicine, slick as a fox, an' quick as a cougar. I can't get the goods on him, but I'm shore he's the chief o' the smugglers."

This sort of talk sent Buck Foster clumping toward the window in a hurry. The veteran considered himself an expert judge of professional gunmen and had never been known to keep an opinion about their abilities to himself. He pushed his

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leathery face close to the window, shouldering the sheriff out of the way.

Out of the Border Rest, Buck spied several unshaven toughs coming with a none too steady step, which meant that they had been drinking heavily. Leading them was the six-foot Cato Cassidy, husky, bearded, and plainly a bullying braggart.

Cato reached the sidewalk and halted to stare up and down the street with ugly black eyes, as if in the hope of finding a little excitement before leaving town.

"Huh!" Buck Foster snorted contemptuously. "That fellar needs his horns cut. I met plenty like him, an' they won't forget what I——" Buck caught his breath. "Look!" he cried, pointing out the window. "Thar come Joe Scott an' the heathen from the general store next ter the gin mill."

Buck was pointing at a young red-headed puncher and a Chinaman who were turning up the plank sidewalk to pass the Border Rest. The arms of the Circle J pair were loaded with bundles containing supplies for the planned bear hunt. It was apparent that neither Joe Scott nor Sing Lo realized the opportunity for horse play that they offered Cato Cassidy's gang.

CHAPTER II.

AN OWL-HOOT ROOST.

BILLY WEST, standing at the jail window, suspected what was going to happen. But he was powerless, at this distance, to prevent Cato's first move.

He saw the bearded gunman step into the path of the under-sized Sing Lo, and leer down at him. Cato's husky voice reached Billy's ears as he said:

"What yuh hidin' in them bundles, chink? I always heard yuh made chop suey out o' rats. Let's have a look."

Billy saw Sing Lo slide to a halt in alarm. The Chinaman was desperately loyal to Circle J and would willingly have given his life to prevent a stranger from investigating the outfit's property.

He was quick on his feet, and could dodge like a cat. He would easily have avoided Cato Cassidy, but it was unnecessary, for the red-headed Joe Scott stepped squarely up to the husky gangster.

Billy heard Joe say in a brittle tone: "Pull in your neck, hombre. You're clean off your own range. The saloon is ten paces backward."

That was the sort of fight talk that the fiery-tempered Joe could always be counted upon to hand out, and Billy West in the hoosegow could not help a grin. But the grin of the Circle J boss was short-lived.

He saw the bearded tough's fist whip forward, almost too fast for the eye to follow. The blow smashed into Joe's freckled face and knocked him into the gutter, bundles flying, gun bouncing from its holster.

Billy West had been hoping that Joe and Sing Lo would avoid locking horns with Cato Cassidy, for the sheriff wanted the Circle J outfit to keep under cover, so that the smugglers would not recognize them.

The Circle J boss saw Cato's hand dropping to a six-gun butt. Billy knew that Joe would try to find his lost weapon in the gutter. Cato would then draw and shoot.

Billy lost no time. His hand snapped downward to his own weapon. He was aware of a howl of wrath from Buck Foster standing beside him. The Circle J boss had his Colt out. With one chop, he knocked the glass out of the jail

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window, and stabbed his gun barrel through.

Wham! Billy fired across the street.

His aim, though taken swiftly, was true. He saw Cato Cassidy's holster almost torn away by the bullet.

It was something more than the gunman had counted on—lead from the jail. Cato jerked his hand up in fear. His big mouth opened as he stared at the calaboose window where Billy stood with smoking weapon in hand. Then Cato whirled and with two leaps was across the saloon veranda and diving through the swinging doors.

"Nail the skunk!" Buck Foster roared beside the Circle J boss, and went racing for the front door.

"Come back!" Billy shouted.

"Let me handle it, Mr. West!" the sheriff cried. "Cato didn't get a good look at yuh."

But Billy beat the lawman to the door and outside to the plank sidewalk. The Circle J boss was afraid that Buck, who was tearing across the street as Joe Scott picked himself up from the gutter in front of the saloon, would run into an ambush in the Border Rest. Billy raced to overtake the veteran.

At the edge of the saloon veranda, Buck tripped on a spur and pitched forward with a howl of indignation. Billy leaped past him. The Circle J boss could hear the scurry of boots inside the Border Rest. Gun in hand, he darted in and threw himself aside to avoid lead that might be awaiting him.

There was no blast of gunfire. The barroom was empty. Chairs and tables were overturned. The smoke of tobacco still hung in thin skeins in the air. At the rear, a door was swinging on its hinges, evidence of the departure of all customers.

Billy moved to the back door and glanced out to a heavy growth of prickly pear. He could hear men crashing through the thicket. To follow them might mean to run into a bullet fired from hiding. There was no telling which fugitive was Cato Cassidy.

And if Billy did nab the big bully, what could he do with him? Have him arrested for disturbing the peace? That would delay Cato's smuggling operations and cost the Circle J outfit valuable time in trapping him with the goods in the Big Grizzly Mountains.

Billy turned and strode to the front door of the barroom, where Joe Scott, Sing Lo, the sheriff, and Buck Foster were appearing.

"He escaped," the Circle J boss announced tartly. "We better load our packs and hit for the mountains."

"That's a good idea, Mr. West," the sheriff said nervously, watching the furious Buck Foster, who strode to the rear door and peered at the prickly pear to make sure that Cato had got away. "Yuh kin tell yore pards, Mr. West, about the Triangle Star Ranch, an' also the plans we made. I don't want Cato to suspect what I'm up to. He's so slick he'll pull the wool over my eyes ag'in, like he's been doing for a hull year."

Joe Scott looked at Billy. "You shore saved my skin, pard," the big-eared, freckle-faced redhead admitted. "That Cato packs a wallop like a mule's hind leg."

"He caught you unawares, Joe," Billy grinned, moving for the swinging doors, where a bundle in newspaper wrapping lay. "Who dropped this?" he asked, and his nostrils wrinkled. "Good grief!" he exclaimed. "Get a whiff of it, Joe."

One side of the bundle was dampened with a liquid which gave off a sickly sweet odor of violets that al-

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most flattened Billy, Joe, and Sing Lo. Joe staggered back, gagging, and the Chinaman cried out:

"Dlope! No touchee, Mistlee West. Velly much might make you go sleep."

There was a whoop from Buck Foster, who came charging from the rear of the barroom.

"Give me that!" he cried in panic, and snatched the bundle from Billy West. "It's mine, I'm tellin' yuh. I jest bought it."

The Circle J boss eyed the veteran curiously. "You mean you were buying perfume, Buck?" he asked.

" 'T'ain't perfume," the veteran snapped indignantly. "I had the bottle in my vest pocket an' it busted when I fell. I mean it wasn't perfume at all. It was somethin' else ter cure snake bite." And his cheeks were fiery red with embarrassment.

Joe Scott winked at Billy West. "Buck's got a squaw sweetheart," he whispered slyly. "He's buyin' her petticoats an' perfume. I'll bet she's as ugly as a mud fence."

Buck, clutching the bundle under his left arm, knotted his right fist and shook it at Joe Scott. "I ain't got no squaw sweetheart, yuh yammerin' jackass! An' don't yuh go insultin' me."

"Sing Lo velly much likee see inside bundle," the Chinaman spoke up. "Perlaps Mistlee Foster buy Indian girl fine wedding dress."

"Close yore trap, yuh yellaskinned heathen!" Buck roared, and stamped to the front door. "Jest fer that, none o' yuh will ever see what I've got. An' I'll drill the first o' yuh what I catch peekin'."

He halted at the doorway, patted his six-gun, then haughtily turned out to the street to find the Circle J pack broncs and stow his crimson serape in a slicker roll, before it soaked up more of the scent from the broken perfume bottle.

It didn't take the Circle J outfit long to leave the log-and-adobe town of Orahanna. The sheriff did not appear in the street to see them off, for his friendliness might have been interpreted by the loafers on plank sidewalks as an indication of what the Montanans were up to.

Billy had all the information necessary, and was ready to spill it to his pards, the moment the broncs reached the barren foothills of the Big Grizzlies.

A fast trot was struck over a weed-grown road, with Billy leading on the big chestnut thoroughbred that had been shipped down from Montana. Sing Lo, the slant-eyed cook, followed him on a piebald, now and then prodding along a pack animal. Red-headed Joe was next, screwing his head around at odd intervals to grin at Buck Foster, who sulked at the rear in an atmosphere of over-sweet violets.

Ahead of the outfit rolled miles and miles of cactus-studded waste land, which sloped up to tan-and-red benches. Farther on, the sky line was saw-toothed by the peaks and crags of the mountain range, where canyon and cliff hid the secret trails of the smugglers.

"Our first stop is at the Triangle Star Ranch," Billy turned in the saddle to call to his pards, as they slowed their horses to the long climb through the barren foothills. "It's a two-bit spread on a high grassy bench that boasts the only spring water in these parts. Sheriff Ripley ain't sure, but he thinks the owner is in cahoots with long riders. We'll drop in on the Triangle Star boss and ask him about grizzly shootin'. Don't say nothin' about smugglin'."

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Joe Scott spurred his roan up close.

"You say that the sheriff thinks Cato Cassidy is bringing silks an' lace across the border, Billy?" the redhead asked.

"Not only that, pards," the Circle J boss replied, his tanned brow knitting in a serious frown. "The sheriff suspects Cato of sneaking dope into the country."

"The skunk!" Joe Scott exclaimed. "That's the rottenest crime in the world."

"It shore is," Billy admitted, gray eyes narrowing. "It gives me the cold shivers. And it's a hard thing to stop with bullet lead. The sheriff knows that marijuana and opium is being sold to the Mexicans and Indians in the mine camps up north. You know what that does to them. It's the job of every decent puncher to try and stop it."

"The law can count on us, pard," Joe Scott said decisively.

Though the Montanans began their journey in the late morning, it was almost sunset before they spied the high bench land where the Triangle Star Ranch was situated. A distant spiral of smoke gave them the direction, for the trail had almost vanished in the volcanic rock and sage.

As the sky turned gold and the mountains on the horizon lighted up with red fires, Billy led his outfit through the spear grass at a lope to the Triangle Star headquarters.

Purple dusk overtook them before they pulled into the ranch yard, where they found a ramshackle barn, a rickety bunk house, and a big corral. One glance at the horse pen as they rode past it to the lighted windows of the ranch house was enough to make Billy whistle in surprise.

The broncs in the corral were beauties, every one of them, much too good for mountain work. The animals looked well fed even in the dim light, and they capered and nickered to the Circle J mounts.

Billy dismounted before the cabin door, thinking of what the sheriff had told him about the owner of the Triangle Star Ranch. It was that "Step" Hamlin might be friendly to owl-hooters. Those horses in the corral would certainly provide speedy get-aways for long riders. Was this outfit a way-station for outlaws fleeing to Mexico?

Billy sniffed at the odor of beans and venison roast drifting from the cabin, then made his way to the front door to knock.

From the sound of plates and eating tools inside the cabin, the hands had not detected the approach of the Circle J outfit. Billy's knock brought a quick halt to the meal. Boots slogged across the planks. The door opened, and a stoop-shouldered old man with long white hair peered out at the Circle J outfit.

"Howdy," Billy greeted him with a disarming grin. "Me an' my pards are up here huntin' grizzlies. We thought you might give us a few pointers. You're Step Hamlin, ain't you?"

Step Hamlin's rheumy eyes widened. He swallowed like a man caught in the wrong corral.

"Yes-s-s," the Triangle Star owner stuttered. "I'm Step. Put yore hosses up. I got ter invite yuh ter supper, don't I?" And he slammed the door hurriedly.

Billy bit his lips, then turned to his pards. "Cheerful cuss, eh?" he said. Then, "We don't put our broncs in the pen with that spooky cavvy of Step Hamlin's. Joe, rustle some water. Buck, get some mash off the pack horse. Sing Lo and I

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will unsaddle our remuda and picket it out in those cedars yonder."

It was in Billy's mind to pay for the feed which had not been offered them any too hospitably. His concern for the cavvy was understandable, for he had raised his chestnut mount from a colt. In its blood ran a strain of thoroughbred mixed with wild mustang.

He washed down its hocks, watered it, and attached a nose bag, before leading the way back to the cabin. He was pretty eager to get a look at the Triangle Star hands that forked the fast broncs in the corral.

At Billy's knock, the door opened, and he jingled into a big living room furnished with hand-made pieces, bullhide chairs, and Indian blankets. There was a long dining table set for eight in the center of the room, and three men already sat at it.

Billy halted short at the sight of them. He couldn't help gaping.

CHAPTER III.

FOUR PISTOLEERS.

INSTEAD of leathery horse-and-rope men, Billy found three mossyhorns quite as old and feeble as Step Hamlin, who was closing the front door behind Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo.

Neither the oldsters at the table nor Step Hamlin was capable of forking the wild broncs in the corral outside. They were all stove-up. How they could be smugglers, Billy couldn't imagine.

"I'll have ter introduce my hands," Step Hamlin spoke in a squeaky voice to the Circle J boss. "Then yuh introduce yore hands."

"Howdy," Billy nodded to the frozen-faced old-timers at the table.

The lankiest diner, who had a long red nose and a completely bald head, said sourly, "My name is Sam Houston."

"Me, I'm Andrew Jackson," spoke up the second, a sawed-off gent whose front teeth were gone.

"An' I'm Bill Cody," announced the third, who sported a silvery goatee.

Billy's face was a poker mask at this recital, although he did want to chuckle. He wheeled to name his outfit. It was to find Buck Foster glowering at the diners, jaw jutting, eyes flashing defiance.

"I'll be a horned toad if I ain't heerd o' all these hombres afore," Buck snapped. "But that gent thar"—he pointed at the man with the goatee—"ain't Buffalo Bill Cody. I know Buffalo Bill real personal."

"Pipe down!" Billy warned, for the goateed gent at the table was rising from his chair in anger.

"I didn't say my name was *Buffalo* Bill!" the old-timer cried shrilly. "I jest said it was Bill Cody, stranger, an' Bill Cody it remains."

Now Buck never had been quick on the come-back, and it was lucky that the oldster's reply dumfounded him for a moment, since it gave Billy an opportunity to smooth the situation. After all, the Circle J outfit had come looking for information that might lead them to discover the smuggler trail. Billy already had an idea that those horses outside in the corral were being used by others than the diners. He wanted to find out by whom.

"My pard, Buck Foster, is plumb sorry," Billy hastily apologized. "Don't pay no attention to him. This is Joe Scott, my ace rider, and there is Sing Lo, our cook. We're all from Montana, down here buyin' feeder cattle. But we thought a little grizzly shootin' would be a vacation."

Step Hamlin shuffled to the head

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of the table. "Set down an' eat," he snapped, as if the speech rubbed him the wrong way.

Without taking offense, Billy motioned to his pards. "Let's go, boys," he said in a hearty tone which he didn't feel. "That's the handsomest invite we've had in a long time."

Cow camps, as a rule, don't go in for heavy conversation at chow time. The riders are too hungry. Though when at home, Billy West might talk over affairs of the day, here at the Triangle Star he realized that table talk was out of order. The old-timers certainly wanted none of it. And the Circle J riders had been warned by Billy to hold their tongues.

Billy was silent as the white-haired Step Hamlin sent the venison roast, spuds, beans, and coffee circulating around the board. It did strike the Circle J boss as queer that there was so much food.

Had Step Hamlin expected him and his pards? Or did the rancher usually cook enough in one night to have something left over for the next day? Billy pondered the question, keeping an alert eye on Buck and the Triangle Star hands.

He saw Buck pause now and then, to swallow, then to eye the goateed gent called Bill Cody. Bill Cody glowered back at him.

Once, the man wrinkled his nose questioningly, and turned to Step Hamlin to ask if the Triangle Star boss didn't smell something queer. Buck flushed hot red at that, for the living room of the ranch house had begun to smell faintly of violets.

Billy West was pretty certain that those three mossyhorns were not carrying the handles that had been given them at birth, but had adopted the names of famous men of history. Plainly, they didn't want their true identity to be known.

He watched them wiping their mouths on their sleeves. They had finished the meal, along with Step Hamlin, the host; and they pushed back their chairs.

Billy made an attempt to halt them.

"Could any of you boys give us a few pointers on where to find the grizzlies?" the Circle J boss asked innocently. "We don't know anythin' about these mountains."

The gents known as "Sam Houston," "Andrew Jackson," and "Bill Cody" paused to look at Step Hamlin for the answer.

"We don't know nothin' about b'ar shootin'," the Triangle Star owner said testily. "Mebbe if yuh keep goin' west fer a few hun'red mile, yuh might run inter somebody what does know. Around hyar, thar ain't no grizzlies."

Nothing could have been more pointed than those words. Billy realized that Step Hamlin wanted the Circle J outfit to clear out. The rancher was not going to talk to them. He had only invited them to dinner out of a sense of courtesy, and the old hands appeared relieved that the ordeal was over.

Billy watched the three mossyhorns get to their feet. His spine suddenly chilled. For the first time, he saw the manner in which those old-timers wore their smoke-poles, slung low and forward on their ragged denims in cut-down, greased holsters.

And by that fact, the Circle J boss caught their brand. They were all old professional gunmen, hombres who had made big reputations for themselves in by-gone days, the kind of fellows who took back-talk from nobody.

Here in this retreat at the edge of

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the Big Grizzlies, they might be spending their last days, waiting for the Grim Reaper, standing together against enemies of the past. Their muscles had been weakened by time, their nerves lacked the vital spark which means life or death on the draw. They might have been outlaws, or gunmen who worked for killing wages from cattle barons.

Now, those old hombres were through, unable to punch cows or meet the new crop of killers that had sprouted under their noses. Their aim was poor, their draw second-rate. Like old wolves, they might be banding together to fight off the younkers who would be after their scalps for the value of the reputation it would give.

Billy West felt sorry for them. He couldn't believe that they were mixed up with dope runners. He knew the caliber of the West's old gun fighters, particularly the kind who stood before him.

They were the sort who gave an opponent a chance on the draw. They didn't shoot from ambush. How could they get mixed up with a coyote like Cato Cassidy?

The Circle J boss got up from his chair.

"Me and my boys will be ridin' on," Billy said easily. "That was a fine supper, gents. We're thankin' ——" He broke off short.

Outside, horses were pounding into the ranch yard, and Billy caught the swift tension of alarm that gripped the room. He saw the old fellows cock their heads, listening, their shoulders bent slightly forward in the manner of men who were long-used to going for their weapons at the slightest sign of danger. Step Hamlin paled.

"I'll see who it is," the Triangle Star boss whispered. "Stay an' entertain this Circle J bunch, boys," he ordered the three old gunmen. "I'll go out alone."

Step darted for the front door, but before he got there, a voice called from outside the cabin:

"Halloo, Step! Open up! It's Cato. Have yuh got supper ready?"

With a gasp, Step Hamlin jerked the front door open, slid out into the dark night, and slammed the entrance shut behind him, leaving Billy West and his pards facing the three gunmen.

A deadly quiet held the room motionless, while from the outside came the murmur of gruff voices, muffled oaths, the champing of horses' bits, and then the jingle of spurs.

Billy was keyed for trouble. He knew that he and his pards had eaten Cato Cassidy's supper. That, coupled with the recent quarrel in Orahanna, was enough to send the smuggler chief into a killing rage.

But Billy wanted no gun play with the three oldsters in the cabin. Not that he feared them. He was certain that he could beat them to the draw. So could Joe Scott and Buck, who was almost as good as he boasted. Even the Chinaman was quick with the derringer that he carried inside his black blouse. Now all the Circle J outfit stood ready to draw at a signal from their boss, but Billy did not give it.

"Listen, hombres," Billy broke the silence in a hushed tone. "We ain't got no fight with you. But we did have a run-in with Cato in town. If anything happens, it's between his gang and us. This is not a warning. It's a statement of how we Montanans stand. We don't know how you feel about Cato Cassidy. But your actions will speak louder than words."

The three old gunmen said nothing. They appeared to be caught

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out on a limb. They, too, seemed to be waiting for something to happen. And soon it did.

It came in the form of a cold voice —Cato Cassidy's voice—from an open window at the side of the cabin. The outlaw was speaking from the outside darkness, and could not be seen.

"So yo're goin' grizzly-shootin', are yuh, hombres?" Cato was mocking the Circle J outfit. "That's a new stunt of that sheep-brained John Law in Orahanna. Listen ter me, tenderfeet, keep off my trail, or yuh'll eat lead. I could blow the innards out o' that chink an' the redhead right now from where I stand. But it's the smart Aleck in the beaver hat, who drilled my holster from the jail that I want ter tackle personal."

Cato meant Billy West, who was out of the line of window fire.

"When I say 'go'," Billy whispered to Joe and Sing Lo, "dive to the floor. I'll shoot the table lamp out."

From outside the window, Cato's voice continued to speak, this time to the three old-timers in the cabin.

"Throw guns on those shorthorns, boys, an' keep 'em on ice for a few hours."

Before the old gun fighters could decide whether to obey or not, Billy's right hand had whipped downward in the draw. He felt the eyes of the three upon him, blinking eyes that could not follow the speed of his wrist.

It was a draw that bettered the best that they had ever stood against in their younger days. Billy's gun barrel was flipping up and bursting flame-split thunder. The word "go" rang from his lips.

The lamp shattered on the table as Joe and Sing Lo threw themselves on the floor. From outside, there was a cry of alarm from Cato Cassidy. Then four quick shots that sent echoes over the ranch yard. Lead raked through the open window, smashed against the cabin wall. Then came the jingle of retreating spurs.

Billy, engulfed in the darkness, sped for the rear door of the living room.

"Come on, pards!" he called, and darted into a kitchen, through which he stumbled to a back door of the ranch house.

Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo were crowding behind him as he hurled the door open and sprang outside. No shots greeted the Circle J boss. He heard the thunder of hoofs retreating from the corral.

Turning, he ran past the shadows of the bunk house, and looked out to the open bench land. The faint starlight revealed the fleeing figures of four horsemen driving on a cavvy ahead of them. It was the cavvy of fast broncs that had been penned at the Triangle Star headquarters.

"They came for those hosses," Billy said aloud, wheeling to face his outfit. "Cato's off on a smuggling trip, pards."

"We kin git him!" Buck exclaimed.

"Not with the goods, *yet*," Joe Scott said angrily. "He thinks he buffaloed us."

Billy turned to the cedar clump where the Circle J outfit had been wise enough to leave their remuda.

"Come on!" he ordered, talking as he ran. "Those mossyhorns ain't worth botherin' about. I'm takin' after Cato, pards. My bronc is the only one in our cavvy that can catch him. You fellows are goin' grizzly shootin' in the mountains until I git back with the news of that smuggler trail."

Billy was in the trees where the Circle J broncs stood picketed. He snatched up a saddle and slicker roll

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and turned to his powerful chestnut thoroughbred. His pards were protesting. But Billy's mind was made up. He swung to the saddle, giving last-minute orders.

Touched with the steel, the chestnut leaped out, leaving Buck Foster fuming with indignation, Joe Scott and Sing Lo still protesting over being left behind. Billy was gone into the night on drumming hoofs, hard on the trail of Cato Cassidy.

CHAPTER IV.

A COUNTERSIGN.

WITH any other bronc under him, the Circle J boss never would have picked up the trail of Cato Cassidy's gang. But the chestnut was a regular nighthawk, used to running the dark trails in the Montana Bitterroots, sure of foot on the treacherous ground, capable of bursts of speed that few mounts could match.

Billy was lucky to catch the glint of sparks struck by shod hoofs as he swung off the bench and into the mountains. Far ahead of him, outlined against the purple sky, he spied Cato and his men driving the cavvy of Triangle Star broncs along the top of a ridge.

The owl-hooters were not moving fast, though the herd ahead of them seemed to be trained to this night-driving and made no breaks to scatter. Billy figured that the smugglers were beginning a long journey to the Mexican border.

The line would not be difficult to cross from the United States. It was the return with silks, lace, and dope that would be dangerous. Perhaps that was why Cato was saving the fast mounts.

Billy followed at a distance, a lurking figure in the night, slipping into narrow defiles, climbing craggy slopes, worming through prickly pear, and plunging down cliffs into valleys where the shrill scream of a cougar told of the gang's passing.

There was no moon. But the smugglers seemed to know the trail. The Circle J boss rode with his gun in his hand, ready to answer the challenge of a rear guard who might have detected his stalking. Higher into the mountains, he climbed, and the cold crept into his bones.

Billy reached behind the saddle cantle for a slicker in which he usually kept a mackinaw for snow flurries. He received a surprise. The faint odor of violets wafted to his nostrils as he opened the yellow slicker. Out of it came a heavy velvet serape. The Circle J boss had taken Buck's saddle roll by mistake.

"So that is what the walrus was carryin' in the bundle," Billy muttered, a grin twisting his lips. "Buck has gone fancy on us, not only with perfume, but also with Mexican duds." He shook it out and noted that the violet scent was swiftly evaporating. "Well, this serape will have to serve," he decided, and fastened it about his shoulders.

The serape saved his life not long afterward.

Ahead of the Circle J boss, the gang had clattered down a winding game trail into a dark canyon, where the cliffs rose high, shutting out the starlight. He followed, listening to the echo of the horses' hoofs, seeing the iron shoes strike fire from the rocky floor.

The riders vanished into a narrow passageway, which was not ten feet across, where the canyon walls pinched together. It looked as if the band had passed right into a blind end.

Billy rode stealthily forward and dismounted to tie his horse's reins to the saddle pommel. Then, on foot,

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with his bronc following, he slipped into the pass, groping his way along in the sooty blackness. He lost all clew of Cato.

Soon, he emerged from the pass in a small forest of buttes that rose twenty to fifty feet on high. The canyon walls had moved back again, and he could see them towering over this strange maze of stone pillars.

He had the feeling of a man trapped in a weird valley of giant branchless trees of rock. His knowledge of volcanic formations came to his rescue. Here, ages ago, water had rushed down the canyon and struck soft limestone, which it cut through in a hundred alleys before roaring on toward Mexico.

Billy halted. A shadow stirred beyond him between two giant toadstools of rock.

"*Quién es?*" a voice hissed. ("Who is it?")

Billy's gun whipped up under his serape. He could not retreat. He stood in the starlight, a perfect target for a bushwhacker's bullet. His only hope was to fire at the flash of his foe's gun.

"Cato!" he called softly, hoping to throw the hidden spy off guard.

"Ah-h-h!" the voice replied. "Señor wears thee serape. Go on! Señor Cato deed not wait."

Suspicious but anxious to get out of range, Billy swung to the saddle of his horse, wondering what the hidden Mexican's words meant. He spurred his bronc into another alley between the buttes, and rode on, as if hoping to find Cato Cassidy.

His horse wound this way and that, through the maze of rock formations, and presently out of the rock forest, to where the canyon bottom was open, with high cliffs on both sides.

Far ahead, Billy saw the sparks of hoofs, evidence that the smuggler band was journeying on down the defile to Mexico.

"'Señor wears the serape'," Billy repeated the words he had heard. "Does that mean Buck's serape is a sort of countersign? Did it save my life? How did he come by it?"

The Circle J boss never was to find out that the old peon who had sold the shawl to Buck Foster, had bought it for ten cents from a Mexican teamster who had found it in an arroyo near the border. But Billy did learn other facts about the serape.

It was where the canyon emptied onto a wide flat of sand dunes and alkali, which caught the starlight like a mirror and revealed the shadows of riders loping across the open to the Mexican line. Halting, Billy watched them go, serapes fluttering from their shoulders.

They were wearing shawls like his. And it was ten chances to one that they were crimson, the uniform of the smuggling ring, a sign that checked the bullets of the sentinels who hid along the dope trail.

Billy waited, a dark scowl on his brow, thinking of the desperate chance those coyotes were taking against running into a border patrol. But what if they did, now? They carried no contraband.

It was the return trip that was dangerous for them. Would they come back in the night, across those sands where the shifting winds blotted out their treacherous tracks?

"That's something I've got to find out," Billy told himself, and he set spurs to the chestnut bronc when the smugglers were gone from sight.

In the starlight, he could easily follow the trail they had left, since he kept not two miles behind them, giving the wind no time to fill the prints with sand.

He didn't know when he crossed

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the Mexican border. There were no markers. His chestnut brought him to a line of barren hills, where the prickly pear grew thick, and there were scattered cedars, telling of fertile country beyond.

The gang was lost to him, their sandy tracks gone. The stars were blinking out in the sky as the morning mists lifted from the arroyos.

Somewhere ahead, there must be a town. Billy had heard it mentioned by Sheriff Ripley in Orahanna, who said that was where Cato Cassidy got his cargoes of drugs. Cargoes that the skunks would sneak back into the United States with the next night, racing across the sand-and-alkali flat on fleet mounts, striking for the canyon trail where hidden gun hands lurked to protect their secret route.

With the graying dawn, the Circle J boss rode on into Mexico, saving the strength of his chestnut. And the rising sun, spreading pink and gold in the heavens, revealed the walled town of Agua Frio ahead of him.

Stowing the crimson serape in the slicker roll, Billy trotted to the main gate of the poverty-stricken village. His appearance was that of a dusty trail-weary cowboy, coming to town on ranch business.

Beggars were already at the entrance to the main street, wrapped in blankets, calling shrilly for alms. Billy passed them, flipping a coin for which they scrambled.

The town was up, herding goats and pigs through the narrow alleys, spreading wares in the crude stalls. Half-clothed children darted between mule riders. Chickens cackled out of Billy's path.

He rode on until the sign of a Mexican livery caught his eye, and there he dismounted, brushing off his hat. He was not afraid of running into Cato's gang. Those fellows had had as tough a trip as he had had that night. They'd be rolled in blankets in some guarded hang-out, catching their shut-eye for the ride back to the United States.

A swarthy livery man fawned on the Circle J boss.

"I take your horse, señor?"

"I'll attend to him myself," Billy replied coldly, and led the chestnut deep into the barn to a clean stable at the rear.

There, with the Mexican watching him, the cowboy washed his mount, fed it with the best that could be bought, and forked straw over the floor for its rest. Leaving his saddle on the stall wall, he gave the attendant a handsome tip, and turned out to the sunlight to find a hotel.

Billy found a flop house that overlooked the main *cantinas* of the village. He took a front room, where he moved an iron cot close to the window. Lying on the bed, he could just see the entrance to the livery, and watch the straw-hatted populace passing below his post. He dozed with one eye open, alert for sight of Cato Cassidy.

It was almost sunset before the bearded smuggler put in an appearance in the town. Billy saw Cato and several toughs trailing their spurs into a large saloon not twenty yards from his hotel.

They had come from a side street, and were plainly bent on food and liquor. After they had entered the drink place, the Circle J boss pulled on his boots and washed in a basin of water.

A deep twilight clothed the town as he slipped outside. In a small Mexican restaurant not far from the livery, Billy wolfed down some frijoles. He kept his eye on the *cantina* across the street. Cato Cassidy had not come out.

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Paying for his meal, the Circle J boss drifted outside and strolled over to the *cantina*. A glance through a window revealed Cato and his gang playing poker at a rear table. Billy moved on to the livery to get his horse.

The same swarthy attendant was there, wrapped in a blanket and reclining against the front wall.

"*Buenas noches*," Billy greeted the half-slumbering figure; from which lifted the odor of a cigarette tainted with marijuana. "I'd like my bronc," the Circle J boss added in Spanish.

The Mexican stirred sleepily, grinned, and shut his eyes.

Disgusted, the Circle J boss strode into the stable, where the chestnut bronc, Danger, was standing up, awake, and ready to go. Billy saddled the animal, talking to it in a low voice.

He was leading it out to the stall runway when a snarling voice halted him abruptly. A Mexican was speaking to him from the shadows of an adjoining empty stall.

"Not so queek, señor!"

"What's the idea?" Billy replied, playing for time and letting his bronc go on to the outside.

"You are one beeg fool, hombre!" sneered the hidden Mexican. "Do you theenk that Señor Cato would be so stupeed not to ask eef Americano strangers are een town to-night of all nights? Ha! He likes your horse. Eet ees branded Circle J, ees eet not? Ha! You alone of all your friends could find the canyon trail. That ees what I find out when I stop you in the canyon last night. And I ride to ask Señor Cato who ees eet that follow heem. The dead can not follow heem back, hombre."

Billy read murder in the man's tone. He felt the touch of the grim specter hovering over him. But like many another killer, the Mexican in the stall liked to torture his victim before the death shot. The Circle J boss had fooled the man once in the canyon, with the crimson serape. Now the Mexican was taking his revenge in taunts.

Billy found him perfectly by his voice. There were two six-guns in the Mexican's hands as he crouched low in the dark shadow of the stall, thinking he could not be seen. The fact that the man held two weapons gave the Circle J boss an idea. Two guns are not as accurate as one, when in the hands of a Mexican drug addict.

The Circle J boss had to take his chances.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK GOES ON THE PROD.

IT was not until the morning after Billy left the Triangle Star that Buck Foster discovered the loss of the crimson serape.

The Circle J boss had given the walrus-mustached cow-puncher, Joe Scott, and Sing Lo orders to proceed due southwest into the Big Grizzlies. They were to give the impression of bear hunting, in case any of Cato's spies should be following them. Their objective was a high peak snow-capped by the wintry winds, where the Circle J boss would be able to find them.

Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo never got to the peak. They had halted ten miles from the Triangle Star to camp for the night. And Buck, fearing that the redhead and the Chinaman might see him peeking at his serape, had delayed investigating the slicker roll which he tied behind his saddle.

It was while Joe was getting water at the spring and Sing Lo was cooking breakfast that the veteran had a look, since he wanted to be sure he

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was on the right track of the fabulous fortune in gold pesos and glittering jewels.

Chuckling to himself, he sneaked into a patch of chaparral, kneeled down, and unrolled the slicker. His big brown eyes bulged. Instead of a serape, there was a checkered mackinaw.

"Help me Hannah!" Buck exclaimed, bouncing to his feet.

Tearing through the chaparral, back to camp, he sprang for the Circle J packs behind the camp fire. There lay two more slicker rolls. Trembling with anxiety, Buck tore them open. One contained a thick wool sweater given to Sing Lo for Christmas by the wife of the Circle J foreman in Montana. The other held another mackinaw and sheepskin coat that Buck had placed in the slicker to make room in his own for the serape.

"It's stolen!" the veteran roared, leaping to his feet.

Joe Scott was coming back from the spring. "What's stolen?" the redhead asked.

"My Injun map!" Buck exclaimed, quite forgetting the fact that he didn't want Joe or Sing Lo to know of the serape until the treasure had been found.

Joe winked at Sing Lo. "You mean the map tellin' you how to find the squaw who you was buying the perfume for?"

Buck's face went purple.

"This ain't no time fer yore cheap cracks," he roared, fists doubled. "I'm tellin' yuh that my slicker roll was swiped at the Triangle Star. I knowed all along that skunk's name wasn't Buffalo Bill. They're dope smugglers. That's what they aire. That Step Hamlin sneaked outside on the excuse o' talkin' with Cato Cassidy. He stole my serape. He was lookin' fer depity badges. I got it all figured out."

Sing Lo turned to his frying pan. "Mistlee Foster still have bad nightmare. He better much wake up."

"Shut up, yuh heathen!" Buck yelled. "Listen ter me, Joe, we've got ter go back ter the Triangle Star. It's only ten mile. We got ter git thar afore them four mossyhorns dig up my treasure."

"What treasure?" Joe inquired. "Are yuh loco? Billy gave us orders to hit for the mountain peak. He must have taken the slicker roll that you're looking for."

"Billy never took no slicker," Buck replied with a conviction that he had no reason for feeling. "It was them dope smugglers, I'm tellin' yuh. Joe, thar's a map on that thar serape, tellin' whar a hull fortune is buried in the Big Grizzlies."

"Where did you get it?" Joe Scott asked calmly.

"From a pore stove-up ol' Mex in Orahanna."

"Ouch!" the redhead exclaimed. "Did you fall for a skin game ag'in?"

"It wasn't no skin game," Buck snapped. "I'm goin' back fer the loot," he announced, and whirled to the horses.

"Wait a second," Joe Scott called.

"I wait fer nothin'," Buck Foster replied, saddling up. "If yuh two is too yaller ter come with me, I'm goin' alone, with a gun in my hand. I give my word ter that Mex in Orahanna ter split fifty-fifty with him. An' I don't back down on my word."

Joe glanced at Sing Lo. Both of them knew that only Billy West could halt Buck Foster from a shooting spree if once he got started. It was useless to try to argue with the irate veteran.

"We better go with him," the redhead whispered. "Leave the duffel,

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Sing Lo. We can pick it up on the way back. Buck is loco again."

Cook smoke was curling from the chimney of the Triangle Star ranch house as the Circle J outfit rode up to the empty corral and past it. Apparently, the four old-timers inside the cabin had had a tough night, and had slept late. They seemed to be at breakfast.

Buck Foster swung down from his bronc, but before he reached the entrance, the door opened. White-haired Step Hamlin stood there defiantly. A six-gun was slung low on the rancher's thigh, in the same manner as the other mossyhorns inside wore theirs.

Step didn't appear scared. His blue eyes flashed as he sized up the Circle J riders, marking the absence of Billy West.

"What do yuh want?" Step asked coldly. "I've plumb run out o' hospitality, an' I don't know nothin' about b'ar shootin'."

Buck halted, jaw jutting, hand near his gun butt.

"Yuh don't, eh?" the veteran growled. "What do yuh know about my Mex serape?"

Joe Scott came up beside Buck. "Just a moment, pard," he cautioned Buck. "Let me do the talkin'. You're pretty excited." And Joe faced Step Hamlin. "Buck Foster thinks he lost a red serape here last night," the redhead said. "Do you know anythin' about it?"

"It wasn't lost!" Buck snapped. "It was stole."

Step Hamlin's eyes narrowed. "Them is harsh words, hombre," the Triangle Star boss said. "I never been accused o' stealin' in my hull life."

Buck Foster inched forward. "Yuh ain't?" he cried angrily. "What about yuh bein' in cahoots with Cato Cassidy an' the dope ring? Smugglin' that dirty stuff is worse than stealin' hosses. Yuh can't bluff me, Step Hamlin. I got yore number. Yuh slipped outside last night an' swiped that serape showin' whar the treasure was buried. Hand it over, afore I fog yuh up."

Step Hamlin was retreating into his cabin, his face growing pale, hands shaking. It might have been the mention of dope that unnerved him.

"Who said Cato was smugglin' dope?" the rancher asked.

"The sheriff in Orahanna," Buck shot back, advancing through the cabin doorway, hand on a gun butt.

Behind the veteran, Joe said in a whisper, "Buck, you're givin' the game away. Calm down."

But Buck was too far gone. Now, inside the room, his flashing eyes fastened on the three other old-timers who were standing at their places at the breakfast table. They, too, looked pretty alarmed at the mention of the sheriff in Orahanna and drugs.

It was one thing to be accused of rustling stock and working for gun pay. It was another to be branded as a dope runner. Only the worst of the outlaw tribe would stoop to peddling the stuff that sends men to an early grave.

And surely those four old-timers, who had fought in many a cattle war and might have been outlawed for doing it, didn't relish the brand that Buck Foster placed on them.

"Dope!" the goateed gent called Bill Cody exclaimed. "Cato don't run dope."

"He don't?" Buck flamed up. "What was he takin' yore fast hosses ter Mexico for last night? But yuh can't throw me off the trail, yuh faker. Whar's my Mex serape?"

Step Hamlin swallowed hard.

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"We ain't got it," he said nervously. "Yuh kin search the cabin. We ain't lookin' fer trouble hyar. We want peace."

"What yuh workin' with Cato Cassidy fer?" Buck demanded. "Yuh'll git all the peace yuh want in the State prison. Whar's that serape?"

Joe caught Buck by the shoulder. "Buck, they haven't got it," the redhead said. "You ought to be satisfied. Billy took the slicker roll. Let's be on our way."

"So be," Sing Lo echoed, walking up beside the veteran.

Buck turned on them, shaking a finger in their faces. "It's my serape, ain't it?" he demanded. "It's worth a hull fortune. Yuh leave me be. I ain't only pertectin' myself, but I'm workin' fer that pore Mex down in Orahanna."

Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo were so occupied with themselves at that moment that they were caught off guard. The veteran was venting his indignation on the redhead, shaking Joe's arm off his shoulder; and Joe was trying to restrain him.

Joe didn't think that the old-timers would put up a fight. The mossyhorns didn't. Danger came leaping at the Circle J trio from both the front and rear doors of the living room.

Before Buck, Joe, or Sing Lo knew it, a husky tough sprang into the cabin by the yard entrance. His six-gun raised on high and came flashing down on top of Buck's head, dropping the veteran to the floor.

Joe, seeing Buck drop, whirled to grapple with the big foe. The redhead stopped the hombre from striking with the gun. But at that instant, boots thudded from the rear door to the kitchen. Another enemy came up behind Sing Lo and knocked the small Chinaman senseless with a blow of steel.

There was a cry of alarm from the four old-timers at the table.

Joe, grappling with the first big tough, wrenched the hombre aside to go for his gun. The second foe, behind him, smashed at his head with a gun barrel. Stunned, reeling, the redhead failed to get his weapon loose. Both toughs bore him kicking and squirming to the floor.

His muscles were like lead weights. He couldn't fight them off. They punched him almost senseless while they caught his hands and bound them with ropes.

And all the while, the four old-timers stood watching in panic.

Joe Scott, dazed and hog-tied, heard Step Hamlin speak as the toughs went to work on Buck Foster with ropes.

"They said that Cato was running dope," Step said fearfully. "Is it true?"

The husky fellow who had leaped in the front door, looked up at the white-haired rancher.

"Mind yore business, yuh blubberin' fool! We're takin' these prisoners to whar they'll never talk ag'in. We've been followin' 'em all night. Whar's their boss?"

Joe's blurred eyes saw Step Hamlin stiffen. "Then Cato *is* runnin' dope," the Triangle Star owner said. "He told us he was runnin' guns across the border. We ain't protectin' no drug peddlers."

The husky tough swayed to his feet, a gun in his hand. "Yuh'll do what Cato Cassidy likes," the gunman snarled. "If yuh don't, we'll tell yore real names ter the sheriff in Orahanna. Yuh've missed swingin' fer twenty years, but the rope is still waitin'. When Cato gits back ter the canyon, he'll tell yuh what is what."

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Joe Scott didn't learn what followed. A chill darkness was creeping into the cabin, engulfing him, robbing him of sight and reason. He was passing out, losing his fight to keep conscious.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH TRAP.

BACK in Agua Frio, Billy West took his chances against those two weapons which held a bead on his heart from the rear of the shadowy stall. His muscles were keyed to release like steel springs. To hesitate an instant longer as the hidden gunman mocked him might mean death. The hombre was speaking to him, and Billy caught him halfway in a sentence.

"Have yuh any last word yuh want ter leave, hombre, because I'm sendin' yore carcass ter a Mexican Boot Hill just outside o' this——"

Billy flung himself aside, stabbing for a holstered gun as he did so. *Crash-sh!* Both weapons of the murderer flamed at him. One weapon missed, hurling lead into the opposite wall of the stable.

The other gun in the killer's hand sent a bullet slicing through Billy's left side, a clean flesh wound that did not throw him off balance.

The hand of the Circle J boss was whipping past his thigh, his fingers plucking his own gun from its holster with the speed of a cat's claws. He had the barrel whipping up as the killer was trying to thumb back the hammers of both guns at the same time. It cost the murderer a precious fraction of time to cock both his guns. Billy's weapon flamed.

"Ow-ee-ee!" the tough screamed, thrown back into the corner of the stall by Billy's smashing lead.

Without knowing whether he had killed him or not, the Circle J boss leaped to the front door of the stable, smoking weapon in hand. His horse was waiting outside the livery.

Billy saw the Mexican livery attendant stirring from the sleep induced by the drugged cigarette which Cato's hired murderer had given him. With a jump, the Circle J boss was in the saddle and spurring toward the *cantina* where Cato and his hirelings had been drinking.

Peons dived aside, shouting at him, as Billy passed the drink place. One glance into the open windows showed him that Cato had gone. The smuggler must have left while the Circle J boss was saddling up.

Perhaps Cato had had spies waiting to tell him that Billy was entering the death trap in the stable. Chuckling over the puncher's fate, Cato had ridden to the United States with his cargo of drugs.

Billy's chestnut whirled into a dark alleyway and thundered through, raising dust in the pools of light that were made by flanking windows. He was striking for the border, for the sand-and-alkali flat which would be bathed in the light of stars. Cato could not get across that wide stretch without being seen.

An hour later, Billy was out of the Mexican hills and loping down to the wide flat. About his shoulders, hung the crimson serape that Buck had purchased from the peon in Orahanna. The Circle J boss was taking no chances on being bushwhacked. He wanted to meet Cato Cassidy face to face, for the smuggler now had the goods with him.

A sickle moon was coming up, and the white face of the flat caught its pale light like a mirror. No man or coyote could avoid detection on the

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level sand and alkali. And Billy picked up sight of Cato's gang, three miles away, riding hard into the United States, and pointing to the Big Grizzly range and the canyon trail.

Setting spurs, the Circle J boss started out, counting four riders, one of them Cato, in the band ahead of him. They were driving a cavvy of six broncs ahead of them. And the truth of those six animals now came to Billy West. He suddenly discovered why those animals were kept so sleek and well fed. Those horses were the carriers of the contraband, and with light packs attached to their backs, they would outrun any border patrol.

Riding forward over the pommel to overtake the gang, Billy figured more about those fast horses which the Triangle Star kept for Cato Cassidy. The Circle J boss knew the tendency of broncs to gallop homeward when their work was done for the day, for oats and water awaited.

He saw how fast the Triangle Star horses went, without guidance, striking for the Big Grizzlies by pure habit. They were well-trained to the canyon trail. They'd run themselves ragged to get up the smugglers' route and back to the Triangle Star and fodder. And if shots sounded behind them, they'd run all the faster.

No wonder Cato took such a desperate chance in crossing the sand flat. If fired at, he could halt and fight, letting those broncs with the incriminating evidence escape from the law. And if Cato was caught, he could put up a cock-and-bull story about being out hunting wild horses. Sheriff Ripley in Orahanna said he'd been picked up twice on the border, without the goods.

"He's caught himself in his own rope this time," Billy growled. "I'm just one against him an' three others. They'll fight. But I know where the canyon trail is."

And the words were no sooner out of his mouth than the smugglers ahead spotted him. He saw them slow down, allowing the dope-carrying broncs to run on. Billy approached swiftly, to within one mile, then a half.

The gang shouted to learn his identity. It was his serape that fooled them. Billy reached behind for a hunting rifle, a high-powered, straight-shooting game rifle. It was no saddle carbine, but the best rifle that money could buy. And the Circle J boss certainly knew how to use it.

Levering a shell into the magazine, Billy lifted the weapon to his shoulder. He fired. The rifle kicked, spitting flame into the night, sending a bullet over the heads of the gang three hundred yards away. He knew the nerve-racking whine the lead would make in passing Cato's band.

He saw the riders duck low in fear. One of them, on a coal-black bronc, dug in spurs and raced northward in panic. The three others snapped rifles to their shoulders and fired.

But Billy had kneed his horse into a dodging course. He figured that their first lead would miss him, and it did, some falling short, one slug passing wide of his cheek.

Wham! The Circle J boss shot again.

A scream echoed in the night, and one of the smuggler band tumbled from his saddle. The other two flung themselves from their mounts and dived to hiding behind a dune.

Billy didn't know if Cato was one of those two seeking shelter, or if the gang boss was the hombre on the

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black bronc racing north after the drug-carrying horses.

The Circle J boss had his rifle at his shoulder, charging down on the pair behind the dune, waiting for them to raise up. They appeared together, with six-guns spitting fire.

Fools! It was not six-gun range yet. They were apparently panic-stricken.

Billy fired once, twice. One of their bullets went through his hat. It was the last that they fired. He had caught them dead center.

Billy heard their cries lift above the sound of his bronc's hoofs as he swung wide of their fortress. He bent over the pommel, spurring hard to catch that man on the black gelding. He was positive that the fugitive was Cato Cassidy, now.

Cato had more sense than to use a six-gun at long range. Perhaps Cato knew that it was Billy chasing him, and the smuggler chief was intent on reaching the canyon before it was too late.

Cato did get to the deep, dark defile. He was halfway across the flat before Billy took after him. The Circle J boss saw the six Triangle Star broncs vanish into the canyon ahead of Cato. Then the smuggler was gone from sight.

Billy reached the entrance to the gorge and halted. He didn't want to take his horse in there. Cato might be lurking behind a crag, waiting to shoot him in the moonlight. A poorly aimed bullet might strike the chestnut.

Billy dismounted, drew a six-gun for close fighting, and went on foot. Gliding forward on his toes, making no sound, he listened for sign of his foe. Far ahead of him, the drug-carrying horses were making a clatter on the rock floor. Cato might be behind them, or he might be lurking just ahead.

Weapon cocked, the Circle J boss advanced, swinging wide of boulders behind which his foe might be, hugging the deeper shadows of the cliffs to stay out of the light of the moon that knifed down into the deep defile.

A half mile fell behind Billy. Now all sound of horses' hoofs was gone. And in its stead there lifted the sharp blast of six-guns from far up the defile. Screams echoed shrilly down the canyon. A fight seemed to be in progress up there.

A chill ran down Billy's spine. He quickened his steps, taking desperate risks. The fighting ahead of him was dying away. He heard husky voices bellowing. Men seemed to be calling for Cato Cassidy. Billy drew closer to the sounds. He halted, listening.

"Whar aire yuh, Cato?" some one was calling. "Come out o' hidin', yuh dirty skunk! It's Step Hamlin invitin' yuh. Yuh tol' me an' the boys yuh was usin' our hosses ter run guns inter Mexico. Yo're runnin' dope, yuh filthy snake! We might be outlawed, but we ain't mixed up with drug smugglers. Show yore gun, Cato."

Billy caught his breath, digesting those words. And at that moment, he heard the crunch of boots on gravel not fifty feet ahead of him. Some one was sneaking toward him. The Circle J boss slipped into the shadow of a boulder, waiting.

On the skulker came, swearing under his breath, while the yells of Step Hamlin an' the old-time gun fighters broke out again, challenging the smuggler chief to battle.

Billy tensed. Cato was about to pass him. The craven braggart appeared, a gun in his hand, gliding along like a big cat, staring into the darkness downcanyon to find a foe.

Billy waited until Cato was about

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to pass him. Cato didn't notice the presence of the Circle J boss in the deep shadow of the boulder.

Suddenly Billy's own gun barrel came chopping down, right across the barrel of the weapon in Cato's hand. There was the ring of steel as Cato's weapon was knocked to the ground. With a savage snarl, the smuggler whirled, reaching for Billy with outstretched fingers.

"Take it easy, Cato," the Circle J boss snapped, ramming his gun into the smuggler's midriff. "I don't want to have to blow a hole through you."

"Blow it!" Cato cried out. "It's better than hangin'." And his hands shot downward, grabbing Billy's gun and deflecting the barrel.

It was not in the Circle J boss to shoot a defenseless man. Nor could he snatch his weapon from Cato's grasp. Cato had it in two hands, jerking violently to get it loose. And while doing so, the smuggler suddenly employed foul methods.

Cato drew backward and kicked hard at Billy's shins, once, twice, and a third time. And as the Circle J boss, biting his lips in pain, tried to leap back, Cato butted him in the face with his head, while trying to spur him on the calf.

Billy's right hand slipped on his gun butt, and Cato tore the weapon loose with a howl of triumph, turning it quickly to get it by the handle.

"Skunk!" the Circle J boss cried.

Billy lunged at him, swinging hard with a right fist. He caught Cato on the cheek and knocked the man sprawling backward. Cato fired as he went down, but his aim was worthless.

Billy sprang on top of him before he could shoot again. With a left hand, the Circle J boss caught the barrel of the upswerving gun. It fired, but he deflected the bullet. And at the same time, with his right fist, he uppercutted Cato on the jaw, a smashing blow that rattled the smuggler's teeth. Then another crack. And another.

Cato's eyes rolled back as he shuddered, and the moonlight caught in them. His face was twisted with agony. A groan, and he was senseless, his big frame quivering like that of a beheaded snake.

Billy recovered his lost weapon and lifted his head. He could hear the charge of boots down the canyon.

"Stay back!" he cried. "Who is it?"

"Cato!" a voice yelled in reply. "We've got yuh. Take us one at a time. Thar's me, Step Hamlin, an' Bill Cody left. Then them Circle J prisoners what we turned loose will be along. We cleaned out yore dope cache, Cato. Yo're next."

Billy grinned. "Not so fast, Step Hamlin," he shouted back. "This is Billy West talkin'. Cato Cassidy is listening to the birdies sing. Come up and have a look. I knew you boys wouldn't be mixed up with dope runnin'."

Into the pale moonlight came two stoop-shouldered figures, their eyes lighted with the fires of youth, guns ready, jaws hard. They looked down at the unconscious Cato Cassidy, then at Billy West, who smiled at them.

"We didn't know about him," Step Hamlin muttered miserably. "He knew we was outlawed fer fightin' in that sheep war, twenty years ago. Thar was once a reward out fer us. We vamosed. We didn't think fightin' sheep-herders was ag'in the law. We was hard-workin' cowpokes."

"I know," Billy replied. "Cato held that reward over your heads, making you take care of those horses

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for him. You thought he was running guns into Mexico, and you didn't think that was a crime, because you figured that Mexicans were just like sheep-herders. Boys, you've helped break up a big dope ring. If there's any old reward out for you, go back to Sheriff Ripley. I'm sure he'll have it tore up for what you've done for your country."

Now, from up the canyon, there came a wild war whoop. Some one was racing down the defile, with war boiling in his neck.

"Whar aire they? Let me at 'em."

"Buck!" Billy shouted.

Step Hamlin swallowed hard. "Andrew Jackson was plumb bad wounded," he said. "Andrew untied yore pards, Mr. West. Cato's gang had 'em in a cave. We followed the gang when they took yore pards prisoner at the Triangle Star. We had to wait until dark to start the fight, because our broncs hadn't arrived with the dope. An' we wanted ter make sure."

Buck Foster came rushing up, spotted Billy West, and halted short. The veteran blinked.

"Yuh got my serape!" the veteran exclaimed. "Thar it is! Yuh took it!"

Billy looked at the shawl about his shoulders. "It saved my life, Buck," Billy West said. "Did you know that this serape was a password with the smuggler ring. They all wear red ones, so they won't mistake each other."

Buck's mouth dropped open. "Wha-a-at did yuh say?" he asked. "Yuh mean that ain't no map ter a treasure. Them Indian signs show where a hull fortune is buried."

Billy took the serape off and held it up to the moonlight. "Those Indian signs don't make a map," the Circle J boss said. "I noticed them this mornin'. You should know more about the Yaqui nation. Those pictures tell the story of the wedding of a white man to a squaw."

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck exclaimed. "They don't mean *that*, do they?"

"They certainly do, Buck," Billy chuckled. "I ain't foolin', either."

Buck choked. "Gosh, Billy, don't yuh ever tell Joe, will yuh? I'll do anythin' fer yuh. I'll work a hundred years fer no pay. But don't tell him that. Hyar, give me that serape! I'm goin' ter bury it afore he turns up."

Buck *will* be workin' fer nothin' fer quite a spell, seein' as how he blew all his pay on thet serape an' perfume. But we reckon the veteran waddy won't mind losin' all thet dinero if he kin jest be shore thet Joe an' Sing Lo don't find out about it. Watch fer the next adventure of the Circle J pards in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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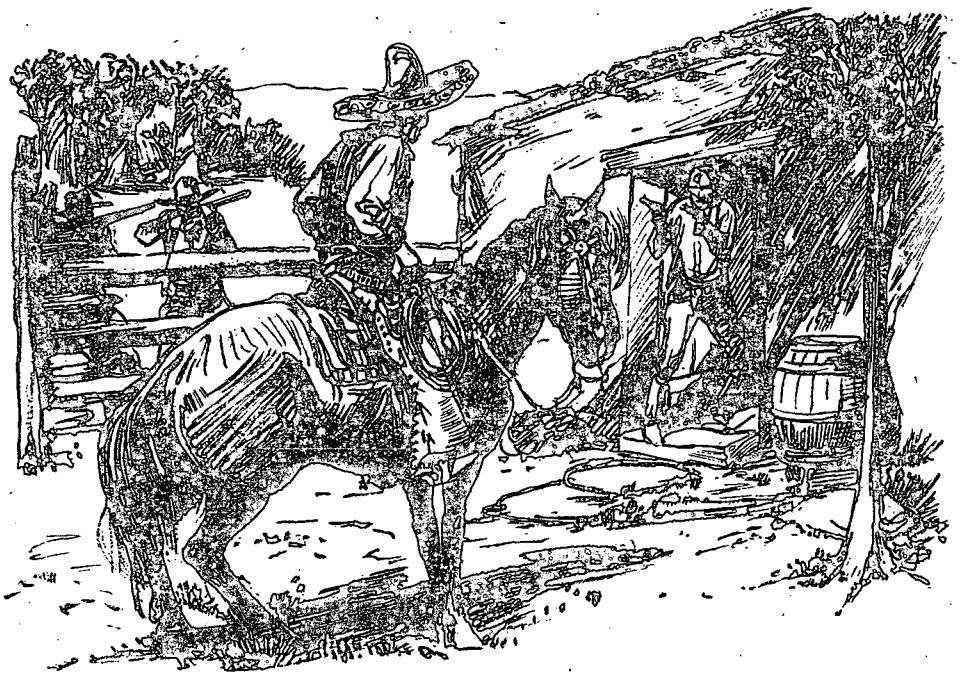

Gun Law In Cotulla

A "Shootin' Fool" Story

By Houston Irvine

Author of "The Shootin' Fool Plays A Spade," etc.

WITH a grunt, the youngest of the lawmen attracted the attention of the two officers who were standing beside him.

"Look there!" Lucius Carey directed the gaze of his friends. His own popping blue eyes were staring fixedly at a man who swaggered in through the swinging doors of the Maverick Saloon.

"Waal!" Sheriff Alcorn took one short look, then turned his shrewd gray eyes back to the glass that he had put on the long, whisky-stained bar. "I don't know the gent," he declared in a growling tone of authority.

Pushing back his gray Stetson, he brushed his stubby fingers over the short, stiff red hairs that partly encircled his otherwise totally bald head, and stared, with satisfaction, at the reflection of his own round, florid face in the back-bar mirror.

"I never seen thet hombre before," drawled Hank Rogers, the veteran deputy, shifting a big chew of tobacco from one lean weather-beaten cheek to the other.

He was a tall, lanky native of the prickly-pear country, who knew his business about as well as any peace officer in the West. A long, mournfully drooping black mustache sof-

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tened the straight line of his mouth. And the brown eyes peering out from under the rakishly tilted brim of his dark sombrero were sleepy looking.

Lucius—better known as the "Shootin' Fool Deputy"—never drank a drop of liquor. But he often dropped into the Maverick with his friends. The saloon, just across Main Street from the sheriff's office and jail, had been the scene of much trouble, many fights.

Visiting bullies and gunmen nearly always met in the barroom when they came to Cotulla. The sheriff and his deputies sometimes trapped important crooks right there, and at other times picked up their trails in the saloon.

The Shootin' Fool always was alert. But he was unusually wide awake when in the Maverick.

"The trouble with the kid is," Hank said laughingly, "it don't matter who he sees, he starts gittin' suspicious right away."

"Thet's right," growled Sheriff Alcorn. "Some day I look fer Looshis to arrest the wrong hombre. An' then it'll jest be too bad."

"Oh, yeah?" The young deputy sheriff flared up instantly. "I—I—er—er——"

He was too angry and embarrassed to keep from stuttering. His smooth cheeks, that no amount of Texas sun and wind had been able to tan, flushed bright crimson. His strong chin pushed forward doggedly.

Lucius's light complexion alone was enough to make a lot of folks think him a greenhorn. But in addition, he garbed his tall, awkward form in fancy duds that no honest-to-goodness puncher would have wanted to be found dead in.

His shirt, for instance, was a pink silk creation; while for contrast, he had a brilliant-green neckerchief fastened at his throat with a silver ring. His batwing chaps were of yellow cowhide. His high-heeled boots were polished until they vied with the shining star on his chest.

In a tied-down holster on each slender thigh a pearl-handled six-gun hung. But what was most important, their owner knew how to use them.

"I guess when I put the handcuffs on the wrong man, it'll be time for you to laugh," he managed to blurt.

He did not take his blue eyes off the stranger for a second. In fact, when a long, straggling cowlick of yellow hair threatened to blind him, he jabbed it back impatiently under the mountainous crown of his cream-colored sombrero.

The deputy himself could not have told why he was so interested in the man, or even if he had any real suspicion. There was just something about the hombre that keyed every one of the Shootin' Fool's senses to the peak.

Dressed in ordinary range clothing, with black batwing chaps, high-heeled boots, and a low-slung holster on each hip, the stranger might not have aroused any unusual attention if it had not been for the swaggering way in which he walked to the bar. His course brown features twisted in a mocking sneer, as much as to say:

"I'm a better man than any of you! If you don't believe it, grab for your guns!"

Looking at the handles of the hombre's .45s, Lucius saw that they carried several notches. The man's cold black eyes, set too far apart over the bridge of his twisted, broken nose, stared narrowly from beneath the pulled-down brim of his battered black sombrero, seeming to

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study the entire crowd in the barroom at a single glance.

"Pass me over a drink, buddy," he growled at the bartender. "An' make it snappy."

"Er-uh!" The slim, sallow-faced saloon man looked at the customer doubtfully.

It was customary for strangers to toss down their money on the bar when they ordered drinks. But that was one newcomer who was in no hurry to pay for his liquor.

"Waal," he snorted, standing with his legs braced apart and his thick thumbs hooked over the loops of his sagging cartridge belt, "what yuh waitin' on?"

"L-l-let's see the color of yore money." The frightened drink dispenser took a swipe across the bar with his grimy apron.

"Hah-hah-hah!" the stranger roared a jeering laugh that Lucius Carey was to remember for many a day. Gruff, coarse, bellowing, that laughter seemed full of mockery and challenge.

"We don't do any credit business," murmured the bartender.

"I reckon I'd better interdooce myself," snarled the customer. "Yo've heard o' Sure-death Sampson, ain't yuh?"

"Uh-huh." The saloon man's jaw dropped.

"I'm him." The other leered. "Now how's my credit?"

"I—I guess yuh can have a drink on the house."

"Hah-hah-hah!" the visitor laughed again. That jeering, bullying laugh was unlike any the Shootin' Fool had ever heard before.

None of the Cotulla officers needed to be told any more about "Sure-death" Sampson. He was one of the worst killers the West had ever produced. He had earned his nickname by boasting so often in public that there was not a man living who could face his guns.

Perhaps that was true, but there were many dark tales which indicated that some of Sure-death's victims had died with bullets in their backs, instead of in their chests. At any rate, the gunman had left a crimson trail across half a dozen States.

He had been heard of in northern Texas many times before. But that was the first time he had ventured as far south as Cotulla.

"This county ain't got any room fer a feller of yore reputation, mister." Sheriff Alcorn acted at once. "Hit the trail!"

"Huh!" Sure-death jerked around. "Have yuh got a warrant?"

"Mebbe I ain't got a definite charge to arrest yuh on," replied the sheriff. "But when I tell yuh to cl'ar out, yuh'd better go."

"An' I'm backin' thet up," declared Hank Rogers.

"Hah-hah-hah!" Once more the crazy laugh pealed out in the close, ill-smelling barroom.

Lucius Carey was tempted to reach for his pearl-handled .45s. He was not afraid of any one beating his draws when the odds were even.

But, he thought, there was no need of his guns at that moment. Not even a crazy man would try to oppose the three officers together. If any one of the lawmen had been alone, Sure-death Sampson might try to shoot him. But——

It was the unexpectedness of the gunman's draw that almost cost the three officers their lives. As was the case with so many killers, Sure-death had earned most of the notches on his guns by taking his victims by surprise.

At one moment he looked as if he was going to obey the sheriff's order to leave. The next instant,

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with sneaking, catlike quickness, he grasped the notched handles of his .45s.

The guns leaped from their holsters too fast for surprised human eyes to see. Sure-death's thumbs jerked back the hammers as the muzzles swung around.

"What the——" The officers grabbed for their smoke poles at the same instant. Too late!

Crash! Wham! Sure-death had squeezed the triggers of his guns. He did not give his victims a chance.

"I'm hit!" Sheriff Alcorn yelled.

He stopped trying to draw his .45s and clutched at his throat, where a crimson stain was spreading suddenly over his gray shirt. He staggered against the bar, then fell in a writhing heap across the foot rail.

"Ou-ee!" The bellow died abruptly in Hank Rogers's throat as the veteran dropped to the floor, with an unfired gun in his right hand.

His dark sombrero was knocked off. Across the left side of his head, just above his ear, a long, fresh crimson bullet wound cut through his black hair. Hank did not move after he struck the floor, but lay as still as death itself.

"My gosh!" The Shootin' Fool believed that both of his friends were killed.

The young deputy's smooth face paled. His blue eyes narrowed. His strong chin shoved out stubbornly.

"I've got to get the killer!" he muttered.

"Hah-hah-hah!" the bully roared. "I'll show yuh it ain't good sense ter fool with Shore-death Sampson!"

Zip! A third bullet from the gunman's .45s bored through the crown of Lucius's creamy sombrero, almost jerking the hat from his head. He could feel the leaden slug tug at his hair as it passed.

Dog-gone! That was close. Common sense told the young deputy that he ought to duck for safety. It was not a question of bravery. The Shootin' Fool had that to spare.

The bartender and all the regular customers of the Maverick weren't taking needless chances of exposing themselves. At the first sign of gun play, they had dived for cover back of the bar, beneath tables and behind anything that might provide protection.

Lucius glanced quickly around him. There was nothing close but the bar, behind which he might fortify himself. The liquor counter was high enough to require an athlete to jump it.

Tensing every muscle, the deputy hurled himself at the bar. There was not room for much of a running leap. But Lucius cleared the top of the counter by a fraction of an inch, to hurtle down behind, where a dozen terrified men already were crouching.

Wham! A bullet from Sure-death's guns knocked splinters from the top of the bar, half an inch above the Shootin' Fool's head.

"Hah-hah-hah!" laughed the killer. "I'd rather kill me an officer than I would anybody else."

II.

Lucius Carey did not dive behind the bar to crouch there like a coward. As his boot heels struck the floor, his big hands tore his pearl-handled six-guns from his holsters. Gasping down a deep breath, he sprang upright again, swinging the muzzles of his weapons toward the laughing killer.

The latter was backing toward the swinging doors to the street.

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But he was expecting the Shootin' Fool to jump up behind the bar. His swarthy face, with its broken nose, twisted hideously. His wide-set eyes looked like tiny black beads.

Crash! Bang! Both of his notched guns blazed at once.

One of the bullets burned across Lucius's ribs, just over his heart. The other tore at the right sleeve of his bright silk shirt.

The deputy's teeth ground together. His cheeks crimsoned with rage. His eyes flashed with the joy of action, as well as contempt for the cowardly gunman.

Wham! His .45s crashed. He thought he could not fail to down his foe at such close range.

But Sure-death Sampson had started to dodge from side to side as he sprang backward. Only one of the Shootin' Fool's bullets struck flesh. That caught the murderer in the right shoulder, whirling him half around, but at the same time driving him through the swinging doors.

For an instant, Lucius thought that he had got his man. Placing his hands on the bar, without letting go of his guns, the deputy heaved his tall form up onto the counter, intending to slide over it and race out into the street, to make certain that Sure-death Sampson was not escaping.

The killer had been little more than nicked by the Shootin' Fool's bullet. As the young officer straddled the bar, Sure-death suddenly shoved apart the swinging doors and stuck his head back inside the saloon.

Lucius had no time to dodge. One of the murderer's deadly weapons spat flame.

It suddenly seemed to the young deputy as if a thunderbolt struck inside his head. For an instant a hot, blinding light appeared to flash across his eyes and brain. Then, just as suddenly, everything went black. The Shootin' Fool sprawled face downward on the bar, gripping the ivory handles of his six-guns.

"Hah-hah-hah!" With a last insane laugh, Sure-death leaped back out through the swinging doors to his waiting horse.

How long Lucius Carey was unconscious he did not know. But when he finally stirred and sat up, blinking his blue eyes, the bartender and the saloon customers were gathered around, looking at him.

The deputy's head felt as if some one was pounding on it with a sledge hammer. He imagined he saw flashes of light. Raising a shaking hand to his left temple, he brought it away with his fingers dripping crimson.

He felt dizzy. But he steadied himself with steel nerves and stared about him. A few feet away, Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers were stretched on their backs on the floor. Their wide-open eyes looked glassily and unseeingly at the ceiling.

Were they dead? The Shootin' Fool thought so.

Like a flash, remembrance of the entire battle came to him. Staggering, he slid to the floor. His blue eyes glared at the crowd.

"You're a fine bunch," he growled. "Why didn't some of you try to help me stop that gunman?"

The customers looked at one another sheepishly.

"Er—er—yuh see——" the barkeeper began to stammer.

"Shore-death Sampson didn't have nothin' I wanted to stop him fer," one of the other men cut in.

"Bah!" Lucius raged. "You're a lot of cowards."

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"I don't see thet yuh did so much, kid." Another hombre sneered. "Yuh didn't no more than git yore guns out 'fore yuh got creased."

"That doesn't matter." The deputy had to steady himself against the bar to keep from tottering. "At least, I tried. I'm not worrying about a little nick in my head."

"Yuh ought not," came the reply. "Thet's more than yore head ever had in it before."

The Shootin' Fool bit his lips to keep back a hot retort. That was no time for banter, he told himself, with poor Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers lying there, staring at the ceiling. At least, thought the deputy, he could shame some of the men into going with him to catch Sure-death Sampson.

"I'm riding on the trail at once," he announced. "I want five men for a posse. Who's going with me?"

"I've got to stay hyar an' look after business," said the bartender.

"I don't want you, anyway," replied Lucius. "You'd be practically worthless in a fight."

"I have other things I've got to attend to in town," a customer excused himself.

"So have I."

Every other patron squirmed out of the job.

Some officers might have argued, even tried to draft the men. But not the Shootin' Fool. He had seen the time when a posse was more of a hindrance than a help, anyway.

"O. K.," he growled. "I'll catch Sure-death Sampson. Some of you yellow-bellies take care of those." He nodded sorrowfully at his two pals on the floor.

Lucius Carey did not wait a moment longer. Shoving fresh cartridges into his six-guns, he dropped the weapons loosely into his holsters. Still reeling from the wound in his head, he stalked out through the swinging doors and down the street.

It took him only a few minutes to get his horse—a sleepy brown critter named Molasses—from the livery stable where the officers kept their cayuses. In response to a question, the hostler told the Shootin' Fool that he had seen Sure-death Sampson ride out of town to the south.

"That can mean only one thing—he's heading downstream along the Neuces River," declared the deputy, swinging into his saddle and jabbing his spurs into Molasses's flanks.

A few short crow hops took the kinks out of Molasses. Then the cayuse settled down to a steady, mile-eating lope. The horse, which had been named Molasses because it ran so slow, at least could be counted on to get its rider there and back.

At the edge of town, Lucius struck into the chaparral. He did not cut down his horse's pace, although the thorny branches of the mesquite ripped at his silk shirt. Flat, pincushiony pads of prickly pear slapped against his smooth cheeks and hands, leaving hundreds of needles in his flesh. But he gritted his teeth grimly and went on. Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers had to be avenged.

Instead of following the road, where traveling might have been easier, the Shootin' Fool took the shorter and quicker way across country to the Tin-cup Ranch. That was a little outfit owned by Jess Larkin. But it was the only one within miles, and almost any traveler, even a fugitive, could be expected to stop there for at least a few minutes.

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Every minute was precious, the Shootin' Fool told himself. He had to overtake Sure-death Sampson at the Tin-cup Ranch, or probably not at all. In his anxiety, the deputy was more careless than usual in approaching the ranch.

Molasses nickered a warning that other cayuses were near, but Lucius did not take time to think that the critters might be others than those owned by Larkin. Also, there was no reason to suppose that Sure-death had a gang with him.

Scratched, but grimly determined, the Shootin' Fool loped out of the chaparral into the small clearing around the ranch house. Too late, he saw a dozen trail-worn horses tied to the rail fence of the corral. They were saddled for quick departure.

Lucius sawed back on Molasses's reins, dragging the critter to a sliding stop. The deputy knew that Larkin did not employ more than one or two cowboys. So whom could those saddled cayuses belong to?

The Shootin' Fool looked inquiringly toward the tiny adobe hut that served as a ranch house. And immediately the question in his mind was answered.

The door of the house was kicked open. A man stepped out, with a deadly, notched six-gun in each hand. From behind the rail fence, where they had been hidden, the other riders of the waiting horses sprang into view. Some of them swung the muzzles of rifles at Lucius. Others aimed six-guns at him.

The deputy's eyes popped mainly at the leader, though. That hombre was Sure-death Sampson. Beating Lucius to the ranch, he had taken over the place, with a gang to help him. He showed no effects of the Shootin' Fool's bullet in the saloon.

"Hah-hah-hah!" His wild laugh rang through the clearing. "So I didn't kill yuh in Cotulla, huh? Waal, thet suits me. Hoist yore paws now!"

With so many guns pointing at him, Lucius Carey could do nothing but obey.

"Let me plug him, boss," cried one of the gang, thumbing back the hammer of his .45.

"Naw, I've got a better way than shootin' him. Hah-hah-hah!" The leader swaggered across the clearing, swinging his six-guns at his sides.

His men clambered over the fence to seize the deputy and drag him from Molasses's back.

III.

In a few minutes, the Shootin' Fool learned what Sure-death Sampson meant. Rough hands hauled the deputy over the fence into the corral.

His pink shirt was stripped, torn from his muscular back. His six-guns were jerked from his holsters and kicked across the small inclosure. The same boots that sent the .45s sailing planted a couple of vicious kicks in the young officer's ribs.

He tried vainly to battle his enemies. He succeeded in staggering to his feet, swinging his balled fists wildly. Only one blow connected, crashing against the side of a crook's head. Then Sure-death stepped in, swinging the barrel of one of his notched guns.

Crash! The steel muzzle struck Lucius on the left temple, reopening his old bullet wound. Again knocked unconscious, he dropped as if he was shot.

He was only out a few moments,

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however. When he awakened, he was lying on his back, blinking his blue eyes up at the glaring Texas sun. He tried to move his hands, but discovered that his wrists were tied with wet rawhide. His ankles also were bound so tight that the knots cut his flesh.

"Hah-hah! Hah-hah!" Sure-death Sampson roared. "He's awake. Let him have his medicine, fellers."

Two of the outlaws rolled the Shootin' Fool over on his face in the dirt. Then began the cruelest torture that the deputy had ever experienced, or even imagined.

Three men stepped forward, with quirts in their hands. The whips hissed viciously through the air as the crooks drew them back, then brought them down slashingly across Lucius Carey's bare flesh.

Crack! Snap! The quirts made reports like six-guns when they struck. Every blow laid open a long crimson gash on the deputy's back.

But that was not the worst of it. Any whip would have caused torture when similarly used. But those quirts were especially prepared for the occasion. Made of braided rope, they had been soaked in brine to make the Shootin' Fool's punishment more terrible.

Each time the whips cut Lucius's back, some of the salt got into the gaping wound. Thus the young officer's pain was increased many times.

At first he tried to writhe away from the cruel blows. But that did no good. After a dozen had fallen across his shoulders, he was afraid that at any instant he was going to lose consciousness from the sheer pain.

"Why do you strike a man with his hands tied?" he cried through gritted teeth. "Let me have a gun and I'll fight the whole gang of you!"

"Is thet so?" Sure-death snarled. "Yuh won't fight anybody when I get through with yuh, my purty depity. Hyar, Bud! Give me yore quirt. I'll show yuh how ter whup this feller right."

Not satisfied with the strength that his men were putting into their blows, the leader seized the crimson-stained whip from the hand of one outlaw and whirled it above his head. Then he brought it down with all the force he could muster upon the Shootin' Fool's back.

Wham! The deputy felt as if the rope was going to cut clear through him.

He fought to hold on to consciousness. His jaw clamped tightly to keep back a cry of defeat. His fists were gripped so tightly that his finger nails bit into his palms.

Again and again, Sure-death slashed Lucius with the quirt. But the young officer did not so much as whimper. Finally the outlaw grew tired.

"All right," he growled, throwing the quirt in the dust. "I 'low he's cut up bad enough. I don't want ter kill him this way. I want him ter live long enough ter enj'y the other pleasure I've got planned fer him.

"What's thet, boss?" asked one of the bandits. "Are we goin' ter kill him like we done the feller who owned this ranch?"

"Knifin' is too fast, too," replied the leader. "Git some strips o' green rawhide. We'll tie him up with thet wet. Fasten a collar of it tight around his neck. Then, as the sun dries it out an' it shrinks, he'll choke slow an' painful."

The rest of the outlaws laughed with their leader at that idea. Two of them rolled the Shootin' Fool over

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on his cut back. Through a haze, he could see Sure-death, standing there with booted feet braced apart, hands resting on his holstered six-guns, and a sneer on his twisted face.

Lucius grimly held on to his sanity, where many another hombre would have become delirious from pain. He had one more reason to turn the tables on the bandits, he told himself. He had heard the crooks say that they had murdered the rancher, Jess Larkin.

The deputy had some idea of the torture that was in store for him in the next few hours. That was an old Indian trick—to tie a man up in a wet hide and lay him out in the sun. The victim suffered slow, dreadful suffocation, as the heat shrank the hide.

The gang did not use a whole hide on the Shootin' Fool, however—only wide strips about his wrists, ankles, and neck. The crooks tied the wet leather as tight as they could when they put it on. Then they tossed Lucius over on his face in the dirt again, so that his slashed back would be exposed to the sun, too.

"Thar!" Sure-death laughed with satisfaction. "Thet'll take keer of him. Git yore hosses, men! We've got a date in Cotulla."

"But yuh shorely ain't goin' back thar after killin' them officers," gasped a crook.

"Why not?" the leader snarled. "With all the lawmen dead, we ain't got nothin' ter worry about. An' I want ter rob the bank. I didn't have time ter do it before."

The Shootin' Fool stayed as still as possible, listening to the outlaws take their departure. In a few moments they were gone, riding boldly to the road that led to Cotulla.

Already the young deputy could feel the rawhide bands tightening. His hands and feet were growing numb from lack of circulation. His breath came in gasps.

The sun beat down blisteringly on his bare back. Flies swarmed over the crimson gashes of the brine-soaked quirts.

IV.

Lucius Carey squirmed painfully over on his right side. He managed to raise his head cautiously, fearful that some of the outlaws might have stayed behind to watch his torment and guard against his escape.

But apparently they thought the latter an impossibility. A long look assured the deputy that he was alone. But what hope did he have of getting free of his shrinking bonds? Did he even imagine that he could get to Cotulla in time to prevent the robbery of the bank and capture the gang?

Some men would have given up then and there and resigned themselves to their fate. Others would have whimpered and cried, wasting what little energy they had left in wild, fruitless efforts to break their straps.

But Lucius did neither. He did not know the meaning of the word "surrender." And good sense warned him to conserve what strength he had.

A few seconds' straining told him that he could neither break the leather bands nor wriggle out of them. What other way to freedom remained, then?

His aching blue eyes fell on a small wooden water trough in one corner of the corral. Homemade, the tank was not more than eighteen inches high. If it happened to contain water——

The Shootin' Fool had heard that shrunken rawhide could be stretched if it was soaked. That was his only

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hope. The trough was a dozen feet away, and it might be as dry as a bone. But the deputy had to reach it if he could.

In spite of his wounds and his bonds, he could roll. It was a slow and painful task. Before he had managed to get halfway to the tank he was gasping for breath. His strength seemed to be spent. The slashes on his back were reopened. Crimson soaked the dust beneath him.

He remained still long enough to get a little of the dizzy feeling out of his head. Then, gritting his teeth doggedly, he squirmed on, a few inches at a time.

The straps about his wrists and ankles sawed deeper and deeper into his flesh. It was only a matter of seconds until the band about his throat would cut off his breath entirely.

Bump! He struck blindly against the wooden trough. He had reached it! It remained for him to climb into it. Eighteen inches was a mountainous height to a man in his condition.

Straining every muscle, he succeeded in raising himself to his knees, however. He blinked at the bottom of the tank. An inch of dirty water stood there.

With a gasp, Lucius heaved himself forward, dragging his body over the edge. The trough was scarcely wide enough to hold him, but he managed to get his bound wrists into the water.

For a time he simply sprawled there. Then, as the rawhide became soaked, he began straining his numbed arms. Gradually he stretched the leather. After what seemed hours of pain, he wriggled his arms and hands out of their bonds.

At first he nearly fainted with relief. Then he began to rub his hands together, restoring their circulation. He got that done just in time to unfasten the band around his neck before it strangled him. Finally he freed his ankles.

For many minutes after that he sat slumped on the edge of the watering trough, too weak to move. At last he lifted his head and looked across the corral at his pearl-handled .45s. They lay where the outlaws had kicked them. Molasses stood, with reins dragging, outside the fence.

Staggering to his feet, the Shootin' Fool stumbled over and picked up his guns. Going to the gate of the corral, he let himself out and walked to where Molasses was standing. The horse nickered a friendly greeting.

"Good old pal!" The deputy stroked the cayuse's muzzle affectionately. "You don't desert a fellow, do you?"

Grasping the pommel, he pulled himself up into the saddle. Gripping the reins, he settled his feet in the stirrups.

"Molasses," he muttered, "we've got to go to town faster than we came out."

The sleepy brown horse suddenly came wide awake as its master's spurs gouged its flanks with unusual severity. Once more Lucius guided the cayuse over the short cut through the thicket.

Again the deputy was almost torn from his saddle by the mesquite and prickly pear. But he did not even feel the thorns, on account of the other pain that he was suffering.

When he first started, it was all he could do to keep from falling off the horse's back. But with every yard he traveled his strength returned.

By the time he reached the out-

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skirts of Cotulla, he was able to sit upright in his saddle without holding on to the pommel.

It was a strange sight that Lucius Carey made that afternoon as he galloped down the middle of Main Street. The few persons on the wooden sidewalks stared at him in amazement. Some of them laughed.

Stripped to the waist, the young officer's back was slashed and bruised. In leaving the ranch corral, he had forgotten to pick up his sombrero, so his crimson-stained yellow hair whipped about his pale face like a mane. His blue eyes gleamed brightly, however, and his stubborn chin was pushed out doggedly.

Apparently he had beaten the outlaws to town. The place dozed in the sun, as it would not have done if the bank had just been robbed.

Lucius was going to warn the men out of town to be on guard. He did not feel equal to taking much part in the battle with the gang himself. But just as he started to rein Molasses to a stop in front of the sheriff's office, his entire plan was changed.

Riding leisurely by way of the highway, the bandits reached town. They cut around the corner of a building into Main Street, less than twenty yards away from the deputy.

Sure-death Sampson was in the lead. When his beady black eyes sighted the Shootin' Fool sitting there on his horse, the crook's twisted face went pale with amazement and fear. The deputy was the last hombre any of the outlaws ever expected to see alive again.

Sure-death sawed back on his cayuse's reins. The rest of the gang crowded around the leader. All stared at Lucius as if they were seeing a ghost.

For a few seconds every man was too startled to move. And the Shootin' Fool was nearly as paralyzed by surprise. However, he recovered his wits first.

"Hands up, you crooks!" he cried. "I'll make you pay for your murders and other crimes!"

His hands reached for his holstered six-guns. His draw was slower than usual because of the stiffness still remaining in his arms from his bonds. Nevertheless, the pearl-handled .45s leaped from his holsters like streaks of light.

"Hah-hah-hah!" Also recovering from his surprise, Sure-death Sampson grabbed for his notched guns. His crazy laughter echoed up and down Main Street.

Crash! Wham! The guns in Lucius's and the murderer's hands appeared to explode at the same instant. In reality, the deputy's shot was a fraction of a second sooner.

"Hah——" Sure-death Sampson's laugh died in a gurgle as the outlaw plunged backward over the cantle of his saddle. A hole in his forehead showed where the Shootin' Fool's bullet had plowed through flesh and bone to find his brain. Nevermore would Sure-death Sampson notch a gun.

The crook's bullet missed Lucius's shoulder by an inch. Swinging his six-guns toward the other outlaws, the deputy yelled:

"Grab for the sky or I'll give you some lead like that!"

The sudden death of their leader slowed the other robbers. But they still might have tried to fight if several of the Cotulla citizens had not suddenly leaped into the street, with guns in their hands. The gang abruptly decided to surrender then.

The Shootin' Fool saw that the battle was won. Then he promptly fainted. The pain and loss of strength, which would have over-

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come most men sooner, finally downed him.

He did not know when he fell off Molasses. But when he came to he was stretched on the wooden sidewalk in front of the sheriff's office. He thought he must be in heaven when he saw Hank Rogers bending over him.

"Wh-wh-what happened?" he gasped, trying to sit up.

"Thet's all right, son." Grinning through his mustache, Hank pressed him back. "Take it easy. The doctor will be hyar in a minute to look after yore wounds."

"But—but—but aren't you dead?" demanded the younger deputy.

"Huh!" The other shifted a chew of tobacco from one lean cheek to the other. "I reckon I'm like yuh—too ornery to kill. I wasn't nothin' but creased in thet barroom fight."

"How about Sheriff Alcorn?" Lucius blinked.

"He'll be O. K. in a day or two," replied Hank. "He got shot through the neck, but his wound ain't serious."

"Dog-gone!" The Shootin' Fool sighed with relief. "I thought all the time you were both dead. I was going to get that laughing murderer if I had to trail him a thousand miles."

"Waal, yuh got him, all right," the veteran drawled.

"I heard the gang talking about how they had killed Jess Larkin at the Tin-cup Ranch," said the young deputy. "I——"

"Yuh don't need to explain nothin', son." Hank Rogers laid his rough hand fondly on Lucius Carey's forehead. "Shore-death Sampson got what was comin' to him. An' yuh—an' yuh got the last laugh."

FOUR J

A VICTIM OF BILLY THE KID

The young outlaw, Billy the Kid, was busy with some of his friends on a horse-stealing raid on the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

The rustlers were sighted by the clerk of the Indian Agency, Joe Bernstein, who did not suspect that the youths were horse thieves. He believed they were cowboys who had made a mistake in regard to the ownership of the animals.

He rode out to them and shouted: "What are you fellows about? Don't drive those horses away. They belong on this range."

Billy gave no reply to this, and he didn't stop to have an argument with Joe, not knowing what might follow. So, in the bat of an eyelid, he raised his six-gun and shot the agent through the heart.

Joe Bernstern fell dead, without knowing what struck him or who his killer was.

The outlaws then rounded up the horses at their leisure, and drove them off, while Billy remarked calmly:

"He should have minded his own business. The horses were not his anyhow, and he should have known better than to interfere."

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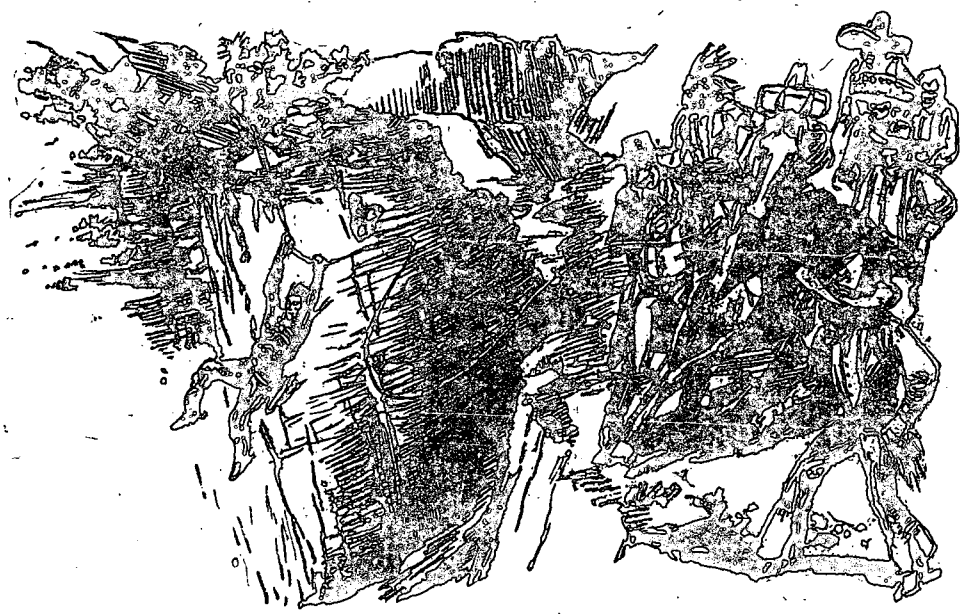

The Trail Of Deputy Death

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "Deputy Death's Gold Strike," etc.

CHAPTER I.

TO PLUNDER A TOWN.

WHEN the "Comanche Killer" reached the crest of Pitchfork Butte, he dismounted behind a screening chaparral. Below him on the greasewood flats was the little cow town of Dos Palmas, on the edge of Grapevine Basin.

The mysterious leader of a dreaded bandit gang was riding alone. The noon sun caught highlights on the Indian's copper-brown back, winked off the globules of sweat, which polished the slabs of muscle like grease.

A bonnet of white-and-brown eagle feathers fell from the Killer's brow and brushed his naked shoulders. The bandit chief's face was hidden behind a Comanche medicine man's devil mask, a horrid wooden creation painted in black and white and red, with slots for eye holes.

"Siesta time!" grunted the outlaw, creeping forward through the thick chaparral until he could part the foliage with his hands and peer down on the sleepy town below. "Mebbe get down without bein' seen."

The Comanche Killer's legs were incased in buckskin trousers, but an

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American-made cartridge belt looped his thin hips, and Cheyenne spurs were chained to the Indian's moccasins.

As the hidden outlaw peered down from his lofty elevation upon the cow town's unpainted buildings, his fingers fondled the Apache tomahawk thrust in a loop of leather riveted to his cartridge belt.

But it was more than a tomahawk. It was the famous "tomahawk gun" with which the Comanche Killer had earned his savage nickname.

The long handle of the Indian hatchet was drilled down the middle by a rifled bore, to fit a .45 cartridge; and at the point where handle met blade of the tomahawk, some cunning gunsmith had fitted a Colt six-gun chamber, half hidden by Indian plumes.

The flint head of this amazing tomahawk, then, became the stock of the long-barreled gun. The hatchet-head had grooves carved above its cutting edge so that the Indian's fingers nestled into it comfortably, forming a gun butt.

Members of the Comanche Killer's gang would have known that their masked leader was plotting something crooked, had they seen the crouching outlaw's fingers opening and closing on the butt of the tomahawk gun.

And they would have been right. The Comanche Killer was putting the finishing touches on his plans for the most daring raid an outlaw band had ever pulled off in the Mexican border country.

The Killer pried his way out of the chaparral growth and lowered himself over the lip of Pitchfork Butte. For ten feet his leather-brown form shot down through space, to land with catlike grace on a sloping ledge.

Dos Palmas was enjoying its siesta, and nothing moved on the single, shack-flanked street except the cow ponies which lined the hitch racks in front of the saloons and false-fronted stores.

Beyond the town stretched the barren prairies of Grapevine Basin, hemmed in just beyond the horizon's edge by the red-rock cliffs of the Funeral Mountains.

Had he been sighted by any one in the town, the Comanche Killer would have resembled some strange insect sliding and scrambling down the steep slope of Pitchfork Butte. But the masked outlaw leader's keen eyes made sure that his approach to the cow town was not discovered.

Reaching the floor of the basin, he halted behind a mesquite scrub to recover his breath and get his bearings. Then he started across the sun-sweltered flats, dodging from boulder to bush as he worked his way toward the rear of the ramshackle building which housed the Manzanita Gambling Parlor.

Like a brown ghost, the Comanche Killer vaulted the fence of the horse corral behind the Manzanita and made his way to the rear door.

Without hesitation, the masked Indian rapped his knuckles upon the sun-peeled panels of the door, in a way which suggested some secret signal.

The Comanche Killer grunted his satisfaction as he heard a key grating in the rusty lock of the door. It took more than ordinary courage for the badly "wanted" outlaw to venture into a town in broad daylight, with every gun-handy gent in a hundred miles knowing that a five-thousand-dollar reward, dead or alive, was on his topknot.

But the Killer was plotting a dar-

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ing crime, and the time for action was at hand.

The door opened to reveal a broad-shouldered hombre in shirt-sleeves and bibless overalls, around whose waist was buckled a pair of cartridge-studded belts sagging from the weight of Colt .45 six-guns in half-breed holsters, leather cut away from the triggers.

It was "Slick" Lester, owner of the Manzanita and one of the secret henchmen of the Comanche Killer.

"What in blazes are you riskin' yore hide fer, comin' up this way?" demanded Lester, as his superior stepped into the private office and the gambler had closed and bolted the door. "Is a posse after yuh?"

The wooden-masked head shook a negative answer.

"To-day, government sending big pay roll for soldiers at Fort Sunset by Wells-Fargo stage," grunted the Indian, getting down to the subject at once. "Much dinero, Señor Lester. Our gang, we raid stagecoach station here in town. Get much dinero."

Slick Lester's cruel, narrow face turned the color of ashes as the meaning of the Indian's words soaked into his brain. Somewhat dazedly, he shoved forth a rawhide chair for the Comanche Killer to sit upon.

"You can't do that, boss!" gasped the gambling man, dragging a wrist across his sweat-streaming brow. "Yo're the biggest owl-hoot rider in the West, an' yuh've got the saltiest gun-slingers alive in yore gang. But do you realize that a squad o' soldiers is helpin' escort that pay roll tuh Fort Sunset—besides the reg'lar stagecoach guard?"

The masked outlaw boss shoved aside the whisky which Lester poured out with trembling hands.

"Big dinero, she need big risk to get him," responded the Comanche Killer, with a shrug. "My gang, he is ready. Thirty-seven men with long guns an' good hosses. Up on Pitchfork Butte."

Slick Lester gulped down a fiery drink of liquor to restore his courage. What the Indian was suggesting seemed like rank insanity to the gambler, who had seen the soldier-escorted stagecoach bearing the Fort Sunset pay roll arrive in town an hour before. No one but a fool would attempt to hold up that outfit.

"Wh-what did yuh come tuh me fer?" stammered the gambling man, regarding the outlaw across the table. "Yuh—yuh don't think I'm goin' tuh ram my horns intuh such a stunt, do yuh?"

Again the Comanche Killer shook his head. There was no breaking the outlaw leader's resolve.

"Only one man does the Comanche Killer an' his gang fear in Dos Palmas," rasped the Indian in a steely whisper. "That is the young deputy sheriff, Bob MacQueen. Heap bad medicine, Señor Lester! They call him 'Deputy Death,' and for good reason. Yore job is heap bad one—you must take care of Deputy Death before my gang rides to town!"

Slick Lester's eyes slitted. Now that show-down was almost at hand, the gambler's nerves returned to normal. He dropped his palms on the butts of his holstered six-guns.

"Deputy Death's an ornery critter tuh handle, all right," agreed the owner of the Manzanita. "Come tuh think of it, he's due hyar any minute, boss. Tuh collect some liquor taxes or somethin'. I—he won't leave this hyar room alive. Yuh kin depend on it—if that's all the part I have tuh play in this danged-fool idea o' pullin' Uncle

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Sam's whiskers in broad daylight."

The Indian headed toward the door, his beady eyes gleaming behind the wooden mask.

"*Bueno,* Señor Lester! We plan to attack heap quick—while town she is in siesta. I go now to signal gang!"

Leaving Slick Lester staring at him in a daze, the Indian slipped across the floor on silent, moccasined feet. He unlocked the door, shot a final glance at his henchman, and vanished with a whispered farewell:

"See that Deputy Death no leave this room alive!"

From the saloon, the Comanche Killer made his way to Lester's private horse stable, a broken-down shed in the rear of the gambling hall. Peering through a knot hole, the Indian focused his gaze on the easternmost horn of the three-pointed bluff known as Pitchfork Butte.

The ordinary person would have detected nothing up among the sagebrush and cactus which furred the crown of the butte. But the Indian knew that thirty-odd members of his gun-toting outlaw gang were hidden up there, awaiting his signal to charge the town.

Smiling grimly behind his devil mask, the Comanche Killer took from a fringed pocket of his buckskins, a small fragment of mirror.

Putting it to the knot hole so as to catch the sun's rays, he flashed a brief signal in the direction of his waiting henchmen on the bluff.

A slight movement among the sagebrush clumps told the Comanche Killer that his gang was standing by, ready to attack.

A gunshot inside Slick Lester's gambling dive would tell the Comanche Killer that his most dreaded enemy, young "Deputy Death," had met his fate. And that gunshot would start the outlaw attack upon the drowsing town.

CHAPTER II.

INTO THE TRAP.

DOS PALMAS was practically deserted as Deputy Sheriff Bob MacQueen left the stagecoach office on his way up the street.

Once a month, the United States government sent its pay roll through Dos Palmas on its way to the garrison at Fort Sunset. Knowing the temptation this rich booty might mean to outlaw gangs, the government always dispatched a dozen cavalrymen to accompany the stage through the desolate bad lands of the Funeral Range.

MacQueen, as representative of the law in Dos Palmas, had just finished his rounds of the town's saloons, dance halls and other establishments, to check up on the population.

"No suspicious characters around, an' not too many strangers hyar at once," muttered the deputy to himself, as he angled across the wheel-rutted street toward his office. "So I reckon thar won't be no attempt-tuh hold up that pay-roll shipment in my territory."

Bob MacQueen paused a moment at the door of his office to glance up and down the street. The population was enjoying its afternoon siesta; even the dogs in the Mexican quarter had slunk off to find the shade of adobe shacks.

MacQueen's activities against the lawless element of Grapevine County had earned him the title of "Deputy Death." Twenty-three years old, six feet three inches in height, Deputy Death made a striking figure in his range costume.

Black was his general color

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scheme. His black Stetson was high of peak and flaring of brim, and banded with a rattlesnake skin bound with a cluster of glistening rattles from a sidewinder's tail.

Looped about his sun-browned throat was a red bandanna, and his powerful chest was clad in a black shirt with white, moon-shaped pockets.

One secret of Deputy Death's amazing success as a lawman in one of the border's wildest spots was the fact that he had come to Dos Palmas town to replace his brother, Bruce MacQueen, who had been killed while on the trail of the Comanche Killer's outfit.

Seconds before he died, Bruce MacQueen had heard from his younger brother's lips a pledge that he would rid the Funeral Range of the masked Indian killer and his band of desperadoes; and it had been the weight of Bruce MacQueen's hand, slumping in death, that had pinned the five-pointed star to Deputy Death's shirt.

With such a vow seething in his heart, Bob MacQueen had buckled on his guns and blazed a red trail into the heart of outlaw country. Slowly but surely, he was bringing about the fulfillment of his pledge of revenge.

Buckled about the deputy's lean waist were two black gun belts, with holstered Colt .45s at either hip. His legs were incased in black trousers which were tucked into figured cowboy boots, equipped with big-roweled spurs.

"Reckon I ain't got no time fer siestas," grunted the deputy, as he entered his office and pulled out a drawer of the battered roll-top desk. "Not with me bein' the tax collector in this danged burg."

Taking a sheaf of tax bills from the drawer, Deputy Death trailed his high-heeled boots out of the office and across the street toward the Manzanita Gambling Parlor.

"Mostly, my job is excitin'," grumbled the young deputy sheriff, as he plodded through the dust, "but like anything else, it's got some routine duties that shore are a bur in my saddle blanket. This danged tax business, fer instance."

Swinging through the batwing doors of the Manzanita, Deputy Death was met with absolute silence. The poker tables and faro layout were deserted; not until nightfall did the Manzanita begin to become active.

Immediately in front of him was the mahogany bar with its brass rail and spur-scuffed panels gleaming dully in the gloom.

"Lester!" yelled the deputy, lifting his voice. "You in tuh-day?"

From behind the closed door of the gambler's private office, just off the bar, came a surly challenge:

"Who is it? What yuh want? We ain't open fer business until six tuh-night."

Deputy Death strode forward across the sawdust-littered floor, sorting out the tax bills in his hand until he found that pertaining to Slick Lester's license to sell liquor.

"It's MacQueen, on official business," answered back the deputy. "Kin I see yuh a minute?"

"Shore, come on in! I reckon tuh-day's yore reg'lar tax-collectin' day, ain't it?"

In the act of putting his hand to Lester's office door, the young lawman hesitated. Something about the gambler's tone, or the prompt way in which he had apparently awakened out of his afternoon snooze, roused a little instinct of uneasiness somewhere in the deputy's brain.

Quickly, the lawman dropped to

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a squatting position, and glanced through the keyhole. What he saw in the room across the closed door jelled the deputy's veins.

Standing across the office, facing the door and with his back wedged against the wall, stood Slick Lester. A leveled six-gun was in his hand, and the black bore of the weapon was trained straight at the doorway.

MacQueen got up and stood back, a frown wrinkling his forehead. He stepped aside from the door, pocketed his tax papers, and took hold of the knob.

"Sorry tuh disturb yuh, Slick," called out MacQueen. "I know this is yore siesta time, but——"

With a swift motion of his left hand, Bob MacQueen unlatched the door, while his right hand snapped the Colt .45 from its holster. But he was standing behind the wall next to the door jamb when the door swung open.

Brrang! Slick Lester's gun roared, and a bullet sped through the doorway inches in front of where Bob MacQueen stood flattened against the wall. The slug struck a mirror on the opposite wall, and shattered glass cascaded to the floor with a chiming jangle.

"Stick 'em up, Lester!"

The young lawman appeared in the doorway, teeth bared under peeled-back lips, a six-gun jutting forth from his hip.

Lester still stood with his back to the wall, a thread of smoke curling from his lowered Colt muzzle. The gambler's chin dropped as he saw MacQueen leap forward, thumb holding back the hammer of his six-gun.

"Drop that hogleg, Lester—an' elevate!"

It had all happened in the batting of an eyelid. Slick Lester, stunned by the suddenness with which MacQueen had cheated his death trap, dropped his fuming Colt and lifted his arms.

A moment later, Bob MacQueen was before him, kicking the gun aside with a swiping motion of one booted foot. The deputy reached out, lifted the gambler's other .45 from its holster, and tossed it into a far corner. The lawman's Colt was prodding the ashen-faced gambler in the ribs.

"What's yore game, Lester?" demanded the deputy sheriff, eying his prisoner through screwed-up lids. "You wouldn't murder a man for a half-pint tax bill! How come?"

Lester's eyes rolled in their slanting sockets. He fumbled for words.

"I—I figured it was some saloon bum—tryin' tuh stick me up durin' my snoozin' period!" said the gambler hoarsely. "I—that is—I got quite a bit o' dinero in the safe, an' thought——"

Deputy Death jerked his sombreroed head toward the door.

"You lie, Slick Lester! I don't know what reason you had fer throwin' yore smoke-pole on me jest now, but I do know that yo're goin' tuh jail, fer attempted murder. Git goin'!"

Trembling as if from a chill, Slick Lester staggered forward across his office room, arms lifted to the level of his ears. Bob MacQueen strode grimly behind him, gun jutting forth at waist level, checking the gambler's slightest move toward escape.

Out of the Manzanita lurched the gambler, as if walking in a nightmare. MacQueen fell in step at his very heels, as Lester headed across the street toward the jail.

Suddenly a drumming of many hoofs thundered on the hot afternoon air.

With a wild yell jerking from his

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lips, Bob MacQueen looked up over the roof of the Manzanita to stare at the plunging horde of horsemen who were streaming down the slopes of Pitchfork Butte, overlooking the town.

"It's the Comanche Killer's gang!" gulped Deputy Death, unable to believe his eyes. "They—they're attackin' the town!"

CHAPTER III.

TREACHERY.

DOWN the steep slopes of Pitchfork Butte streamed the thirty-odd members of the dreaded bandit gang.

Spreading in fan shape, the speeding horsemen made an awful and a dramatic sight as they descended upon the sleepy little cow town, dust pluming like white feathers from their mounts' drumming feet, sunlight glinting off gun barrels.

Wild whoops came from the Apache members of the gang horde; snarled oaths and cowboy yells from the Mexican and gringo riders.

Brrang! Bang-bang-bang! The first ear-stunning crackle of gunfire swept from the bandits as they struck the edge of the level flats, and started streaming across the greasewood prairie like stampeding buffalo rushing to engulf a town.

For a single paralyzed instant, Deputy Sheriff Bob MacQueen stood stock-still in the middle of the dusty street, his quaking prisoner rooted to his tracks not a yard ahead.

Then MacQueen realized their peril, as being the only men in sight and in the very path of that down-rushing bandit crew.

"Quick, Lester! Rattle yore hocks toward the Cloverleaf Livery Barn, over thar! We ain't got time tuh reach the jail."

Whinng! An outlaw bullet bored past Slick Lester's ear, making him hop like a jack rabbit in the direction indicated by Bob MacQueen.

A dozen bullets struck the sandy street on all sides of them, as the two men streaked for the open door of the livery stable.

Flinging shots from his six-gun as he ran, Bob MacQueen had the satisfaction of dumping two yowling bandits from their saddles as the two men streaked for the open door of the livery stable.

Flinging shots from his six-gun as he ran, Bob MacQueen had the satisfaction of dumping two yowling bandits from their saddles as the foremost of the outlaw pack roared into town.

A second later, Slick Lester and Deputy Death were diving into the shelter of the livery barn, and MacQueen was sliding the door shut on its oiled runners.

Brrrum! With thundering hoofs rocking the very earth at their feet and with six-guns hammering out a challenge to the startled town, the Comanche Killer's gang swept down the single street like an express train.

Catching his breath, Bob MacQueen peered through a crack in the barn at the outlaw riders as they flashed by, emptying their guns into doors and windows and yowling like demons.

"Whew! That was a close call!" panted the deputy, turning to face Slick Lester. "They might 'a' salivated the both of us."

The gambler lowered his arms. Prisoner and lawman were reduced to a common level by the grim presence of death outside.

"Listen, MacQueen!" whined the gambler earnestly. "They know we're in hyar, an' they'll be gunnin' fer you, shore as blazes. Yuh goin'

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tuh let me die in hyar with yuh, like a trapped rat?"

Deputy Death, still clutching his smoking six-gun, glanced about him, a frown worrying his features.

"I—I—it's a cinch we'll have tuh stand them skunks off!" admitted the lawman. "I know why they're in town—they're honin' tuh lift that Fort Sunset pay roll, across the street at the stagecoach depot. You——"

Crrash! A .30-30 bullet drilled through the wooden doors of the barn, and rattled through the panels of a horse stall behind them.

"Deputy Death's inside that barn!" came a vicious yell from outside. "Le's finish him, along with gittin' the dinero."

MacQueen and Lester exchanged glances. The gambler was babbling pitifully:

"Give me a gun an' let me help defend myself, MacQueen! I swear that shootin' back at the Manzanita jest now was an accident. I'd been expectin' stick-up men."

A blizzard of bullets rattled against the side of the barn, and from across the street came the shouts of the roused soldiers whose duty it was to protect the Fort Sunset gold.

"I won't give yuh a gun, because I don't believe yore story, Lester!" shot back MacQueen. "But I'll give yuh yore chance. You kin hide yoreself somewhar in the barn, whar bullets won't hit yuh. Me, I got plenty tuh do!"

With a crafty gleam kindling in his close-set eyes, Slick Lester slunk away, freed from the threat of Deputy Death's guns.

Dismissing his prisoner from his mind for the moment, Bob MacQueen leaped to the wall and peered through a crack upon the street outside.

The Comanche Killer's gang had leaped from their horses, which were being held together by a pair of confederates up the street out of six-gun range.

The outlaws were leaping from store to store, hiding behind boxes and chairs, taking pot-shots at the more daring citizens who had been roused from their siesta by the sound of shouting and gunfire.

Brrrrang! Bang-bang-bang! From the stagecoach depot across the street, government army rifles were hammering a vicious defensive against the ducking, yelling desperadoes.

Deputy Death gasped as he caught sight of the half-naked figure of the Comanche Killer darting across the street from the shelter of the Manzanita Gambling Parlor. The Indian leader was brandishing his famous tomahawk six-gun, and the feathered bonnet atop his devil mask was fluttering in air as he sprinted to reach the shelter of a pile of baled hay next door to the stage office.

"Got tuh git that skunk. He's plannin' a daylight holdup o' that U. S. gold, all right."

Mouthing the words through his teeth, Bob MacQueen whipped up a long-barreled .45, jammed it through the knot hole, and triggered a hail of bullets at the zigzagging form of the Indian.

Then came a momentary lull in the fighting outside. The outlaws had flung themselves to places of safety, inside the dance hall next door to the stage office which was the center of battle, and in adjacent shacks.

Rifle barrels, aimed by government cavalrymen stationed inside the depot where the Fort Sunset gold was stored awaiting the departure of the stagecoach, spouted

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flame and smoke at regular intervals.

Outlaws were climbing the roof of the dance hall overlooking the stage company's shack. Bob MacQueen, stooping on one knee inside the shelter of his livery-barn wall, drew careful bead with his Colt and drilled one desperado on the ridgepole of the dance hall.

The outlaw threw up his arms, rolled down the roof like a log, and shot out over the eaves to land with a grisly thud on the roof of the stage depot's flat porch. The corpse lay there, a stream of crimson running down the shingles and forming a puddle in front of the shack.

"Lucky them soldiers happened tuh be inside thar when the attack came!" gritted Deputy Death, ejecting empty shells from his six-guns and swiftly reloading from the ammunition in his belt. "It'll be perty tough on the Comanche Killer once this town is aroused, an' ever' Tom, Dick an' Harry comes tuh the scene with his hoglegs unlimbered."

Taking pot shots through his knot hole vantage point, Bob MacQueen was too busy to observe what his prisoner, Slick Lester, was doing.

The gambler, finding himself free of the threat of John Law lead, crept stealthily through the stalls of the livery barn, seeking a possible weapon by which he might be able to attack Deputy Death from behind.

Then another idea hit the treacherous gambler. In one corner of the barn was a five-gallon can of kerosene, used as fuel for the lanterns hanging about the barn.

Seizing the can, Slick Lester crept back toward the vast hay pile which nearly filled the stable. It was but the work of a few moments to soak the base of the hay stack with oil.

"By gosh, this'll make Deputy Death come out in the open, whar we kin plug 'im!" chuckled Lester, as he struck a match.

Whoosh! The oil-soaked straw burst into flame like an explosion, running almost instantly from the earthen floor to the top of the straw stack, up among the rafters.

But Slick Lester did not stay behind to watch the fire which would reduce the livery barn to ashes. He was diving over the near-by mangers and heading for the rear door of the livery stable.

A moment later, he was outside, shoving the rear door shut and padlocking it. A dozen jumps carried him to the safety of the Manzanita Gambling Parlor, where members of the Comanche Killer's gang—all his friends—were holed up.

The town gasped as it saw the smoke and flame bursting through holes in the barn roof. But very few knew that inside that roaring inferno, Deputy Death was trapped alive!

CHAPTER IV.

DYNAMITE AND FIRE.

DEPUTY DEATH whirled about, as the first hot blast of the fire fanned the back of his neck.

He leaped to his feet in alarm as he saw the entire wall of straw, with which the stable was packed, transformed almost instantly into a livid curtain of pink fire.

"That Lester skunk—this is his work!"

Bob MacQueen leaped forward toward the rear of the barn, six-gun alert to put a bullet through his prisoner if Lester tried to escape.

But he was too late. He caught a glimpse, through the flames, of Lester ducking through the rear door and vanishing outside.

In an instant, Bob MacQueen realized the peril of the position into

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which his prisoner had placed him.

In a few minutes, the barn would be tumbling over his head, as rafters and studding timbers would be consumed by the raging flames.

But if he so much as showed an ear outside the saloon, he would be butchered by outlaw lead.

"By gosh, it looks like I'm done for, fer shore."

Lifting an arm to protect his face from the blistering heat of the roaring furnace of straw, Deputy Death sprinted back toward the front wall of the livery barn.

Peering out, he saw a sight which, for the moment, took his mind off the desperate peril of his own situation.

Crouching behind the pile of baled hay next door to the stagecoach office, the Comanche Killer was conferring with two of his Mexican henchmen.

In the Indian killer's hands was a package composed of six sticks of dynamite. The Mexicans were busy attaching a percussion cap to one of the sticks, to which was attached a short length of fuse.

Holding the dynamite bomb while one of his Mexican helpers touched a match to the fuse, the Comanche Killer displayed his iron nerve by holding the bomb until the fuse was within five seconds of touching off the explosive.

Then the Comanche Killer turned. Muscles played on his brawny back as the outlaw leader hurled the dynamite bomb into the air, in a curving arc which cleared the heap of baled hay.

Like a fuming skyrocket, the dynamite package curved down to strike the nearest slope of the stagecoach company's roof. And at that exact instant, the bomb exploded.

Boooom! The shack vanished in a cloud of ugly brown smoke and a showering blast of boards, window glass, splintered shingles.

The dozen cavalrymen inside the dynamited shack never knew what struck them. Fragments of the roof, of human flesh, of pine siding were flung far and wide about the town, and all that remained of the Wells-Fargo stagecoach depot was a settling pile of smoking junk.

Instantly, a dozen outlaws left their places of concealment and dashed forward through the boiling smoke and dust, wading into the kindling wood which had been the stage depot.

A moment later, a triumphant whoop came from the throat of the Comanche Killer, and the big masked outlaw came out of the junk heap, hugging in his arms the steel box containing the Fort Sunset pay roll.

Transferring the loot to the hands of a waiting partner, the Comanche Killer burst into the open, shouting to his henchmen:

"Deputy Death—he is heap trapped in burning barn! We wait till he come out!"

Dos Palmas was trembling under the gun muzzles of the gang. Peaceable citizens cringed in the shelter of their homes, knowing that to venture out on the street would mean being riddled with bullets.

Having murdered a dozen government men with their dynamite blast, the Comanche Killer was now coolly giving orders to surround the Cloverleaf Livery Barn, inside of which was trapped their most dreaded enemy—Deputy Sheriff Bob MacQueen.

There were only three exits to the blazing livery stable—the sliding front door, facing the street; the rear door, which Slick Lester had taken care to padlock as he made his exit; and the big window near

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the gable of the south wall, through which hay was loaded by means of a huge hook.

Behaving like trained soldiers besieging an enemy fort, the armed outlaws of the Comanche Killer's gang circled the burning building.

From a score of vantage points in gambling halls, the two-story hotel across the street, from vacant lots and from around the corners of ramshackle buildings, the outlaws planted themselves to watch and wait.

Smoke was boiling from the cracks of the doomed building as if it were a smudge pot. Raw flames were darting like forked tongues under the eaves. Portions of the shingle roof were already caving in like cardboard, giving vent holes to shooting geysers of flame from within.

It soon became apparent that if Deputy Death intended to escape by the window, his way was cut off by the raging blaze. Guns raked all four walls of the blazing barn, in case the lawman within should attempt battering his way through the board walls.

Slick Lester was strapping his guns about his waist, in the shelter of his private office, when the Comanche Killer burst in through the rear door, his half-naked form gleaming with sweat.

"For why you fail?" demanded the masked Indian angrily. "I hear shot—I think Deputy Death, he dead—I give signal for gang to attack town! But I see Deputy Death heap ready to take you to jail!"

Slick Lester quivered nervously as he saw his Indian leader gripping the flint stock of his tomahawk six-gun.

"MacQueen—he was too ringy for me!" confessed the gambler. "But —ain't this a good way tuh kill 'im off? He ain't got a chance. He'll come bustin' out o' that barn afore long."

But the tense-faced outlaws who surrounded the blazing barn looked in vain for a glimpse of the lawman they knew was trapped within. There were no tunnels or other secret exits to the sagging old barn, and the smoke was lifting upward through the ruined roof, so there was no chance for Deputy Death to escape behind a smoke screen.

"Naw, he's still in thar, chief!" rasped Slick Lester. "He ain't come out. Prob'ly the heat's kilt 'im, already."

Fire-eaten timbers sagged, and the entire front wall of the old livery stable crashed outward upon the street. Sparks bounded across the street to rain against the smoking pile of débris which marked the site of the stage depot.

For an instant, the panting outlaws got a glimpse inside the barn. They saw a mountain of raging pink, all that remained of the hay which had stuffed the barn to capacity.

They saw a clear view of the empty stalls. But they got no glimpse of a frantic, fire-crazed Deputy Death darting about in his trap, nor of his dead body, smothered by heat.

A crackle of gunnery from the far end of the street roused the Comanche Killer to the fact that the roused town was beginning to go on the prod. With thirty men at his disposal, the Comanche Killer might have stood off an attack by the residents of Dos Palmas, but the Indian leader was as prudent as he was daring.

He had what he came for, the government pay-roll shipment. And there was no possible chance that

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his enemy, Bob MacQueen, could still be alive in that blazing inferno that had been the Cloverleaf stables.

Consequently, two minutes later, the Comanche Killer was leading his men to their horses, down the street.

With the bullets of the angry townspeople singing past their ears, the Comanche Killer and his gang galloped out of town, bearing with them a strong box filled with money, and leaving as mementos of their brief visit a dynamited stage depot and a livery barn that was already collapsing within itself, in flames.

With the Killer rode Slick Lester, openly declaring himself a member of the gang.

CHAPTER V.

OUT OF THE RUINS.

BUT Deputy Death had not been idle, inside the blazing barn which the outlaw gang intended to be his funeral bier.

By dropping flat on his stomach, nose close to a crack in the front wall of the barn, the young deputy was able to breathe without the blistering heat of the air searing his lungs.

"But this won't do fer long," shot the terrifying thought through the deputy sheriff's brain. "Their idea will be tuh plug me with a rifle or a six-gun as soon as I come bustin' out o' hyar."

Filling his lungs with air, Deputy Death got to his feet and glanced frantically around him. His red bandanna neckerchief, lifted to cover his face from the nose down, aided him in walking about.

"It'll be plain suicide fer me tuh show my neck outside o' this furnace!" gasped MacQueen huskily. "I got tuh think o' somethin' inside of a few more ticks, or I'm a goner."

He ran down one side of the barn, six-gun in hand, eyes searching through the smoke for a possible door or window the existence of which he did not know.

But that wall of the barn was boarded up solid. The fire had already cut him off from the rear door and the hay-loft window; the only way of escape would be the front door facing on the street.

"And I'll bet a half a dozen guns is pointin' at that, this minute!" groaned the deputy. "Jest the same, it's all I kin do—'cept burn tuh death, in hyar."

The heat was singeing the hair from his eyebrows and temples and arms. Sweat, drawn from his pores by the terrific heat, evaporated instantly, torturing his flesh.

"Well, hyar goes—outside, an' git my belly full o' lead!" gritted the deputy, steeling himself for the break from cover. "This day is shore the Comanche Killer's——"

But even as the young lawman bent his sombrero brim down to shield his face from the heat, he caught sight of an iron pump located at the end of the row of stalls. Under the curving faucet of the pump, was a small water trough.

With a glad cry bursting from his lips, Deputy Death leaped forward. Smoke pelted him, stung his eyeballs, made him gasp for breath. The crackling of flames was a death knell in his ears.

A moment later, he was stumbling over the pump and was down on his hands and knees, feeling about with palsied fingers. To his joy, he observed that the pump was situated on a square wooden platform, in which was a trapdoor.

"A cistern, by gosh!" exclaimed the deputy, clawing at the ring bolt of the trap. "This is the well they use in winter time, or when some-

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thin' goes wrong with the pump out in the corral."

Timbers were crashing overhead as the fire destroyed rafters. With a mighty tug, Deputy Death lifted the door of the cistern, and found himself peering down into a concrete-lined well.

The ruddy reflection of the flames made a red square on the surface of the water, ten feet below.

Crrrrash! The barn was starting to collapse, almost about his shoulders.

With a frantic cry, Deputy Death swung his booted legs over the edge of the trapdoor, lowered his body into the cistern, and clung to the edge of the door with fingers of his right hand. With his left he lowered the trapdoor over him.

Bang! The floor trembled as the roof of the livery barn collapsed, and the spot where Deputy Death had crouched beside the rusty pump was now a pile of blazing timbers.

Letting go the sill and the trapdoor at the same instant, Deputy Death plummeted down through cool, reviving space. He landed in the water with a resounding splash, and the ripples of the indoor tank closed over his head.

His feet did not touch bottom, indicating that the cistern had at least ten feet of water in it. A moment later, the deputy came to the surface, and clung to the pipe which led to the pump overhead.

"Reckon I'm safe enough," panted the waddy, reaching out in the flickering darkness to retrieve his floating sombrero. "I danged near forgot that the Cloverleaf barn had a horse trough inside it."

Through cracks in the well-head above him, the young deputy could see the winking flames which were fast consuming the barn. Again and again the concrete wall of the cistern trembled, as walls and gables of the barn collapsed.

Clinging to the pipe, Deputy Death let his fire-parched body absorb the grateful coolness of the water. Fifteen minutes later he could tell by the diminishing roar of the fire overhead that the barn was fast settling into a heap of raging coals, and that danger of the well-head being burned through had passed.

His fingers were beginning to get numb from holding on to the rusty pipe, by the time two hours had elapsed. His body ached from being soaked in water, and his muscles were stiff.

Finally the deputy sheriff's ears caught the sound of feet thumping around overhead, as citizens of Dos Palmas began stirring up the ashes of the ruined barn.

"Reckon they're huntin' my carcass!" chuckled the lawman. "Well, I reckon I kin leave this place now."

So saying, Deputy Death pulled his black Stetson tighter about his head, got a good grip on the rusty pipe with both hands, and started shinnying his way up toward the pump.

He was nearing exhaustion when his hat crown touched the bottom of the planks forming the roof of the cistern. Wrapping his legs about the pipe, he groped out with one arm until he found the trapdoor.

Outside, he could hear the muffled conversation of men, busy poking about among the ruins of the barn. The air was still hot, and smoke was seeping through the cracks in the well-head.

"Hey—lemme out o' hyar!" shouted the lawman, in a voice which resounded like thunder in the

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hollow confines of the cistern. "I'm down in the well!"

Thus it was, a minute later, that a startled and delighted group of cow-punchers and townspeople lifted the trapdoor of the charred cistern head, and reached in to assist Deputy Sheriff Bob MacQueen to safety.

"We shore never expected tuh see you alive ag'in, Bob!" cackled the owner of the livery barn. "I never thought tuh look down the well, by gosh."

Dripping like a soused rat, Bob MacQueen groped his way out across the charred planks of the cistern top, and glanced about him. What had been the town's largest livery stable was now a smoking heap of ruins. The heat of the air was still unbearable.

Then the lawman's eyes slitted, as he saw the citizens who were working about the wreckage of the stage depot across the street. The mangled remains of twelve cavalrymen were being taken from the dynamited shack, mute evidence of the Comanche Killer's cruelty.

"Soon as I change clothes, I'm ridin'," announced the deputy hoarsely, as he elbowed his way through the crowd of men who had braved the heat of the smoking ruins of the barn to greet their well-liked young lawman. "I'm goin' tuh arrest that Comanche Killer or die in the attempt!"

"An' Slick Lester rid off with 'im, Bob!" yelled some one from the crowd. "He's the one that touched off the fire tuh trap yuh, so they say!"

Straight to his room in the ramshackle hotel down the street went young Bob MacQueen, trailing a wet puddle behind him from his sopping clothes.

Going to his war bag, MacQueen took out a spare costume—one which figured in the nightmares of every outlaw on the border. It was the costume which went with the name of Deputy Death.

When Bob MacQueen emerged from his room fifteen minutes later, he no longer wore his water-soaked clothing. Instead, he was dressed in the weird costume which was made to resemble a human skeleton.

The vest had white ribs sewed upon it in white leather, meeting a "backbone" at the center. The flaring batwing chaps had white strips sewed upon them to resemble the hip and leg bones of a human skeleton, while the toes and fingers of a skeleton were imitated on the waddy's black boots and gauntlets.

An extra pair of black-butted Colt .45s were now buckled about Deputy Death's lean waist, and stuffed in a pocket of his chaps was the white-leather mask made to look like a skull. His black Stetson completed his garb.

Leaving the hotel by a back way, Deputy Death went to the hotel's stable and saddled Prince, his big sorrel mustang. A few minutes' conversation with a few townspeople told Deputy Death what he wanted to know—that the Comanche Killer and his gang had made their getaway in the direction of Pitchfork Butte.

"Which means they're prob'ly headin' fer their hangout in Spearhead Canyon," snarled the deputy in the skeletonlike costume. "Well, I'm trailin' 'em, men! I'm goin' tuh show that Injun skunk that he can't pull off a wholesale slaughter in Dos Palmas, so long as I'm the law in this town!"

With which words the young deputy sheriff swung into the saddle and galloped out of town, on the trail of the Comanche Killer's gang.

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CHAPTER VI.

INTO THE BAD LANDS.

THE deputy had no difficulty in picking up the trail of the outlaws when he reached the crest of Pitchfork Butte. For the Indian leader had been so confident of escape that he had made no effort to employ any tricks to throw pursuers off the scent.

From Pitchfork Butte, the trail zigzagged off into the foothills of the Funeral Range, in the general direction of the long, desolate gorge known as Spearhead Canyon. From past experience, Deputy Death knew that he was likely to find the Killer's band holed up in this canyon.

"That skunk, Slick Lester, is a member o' their gang, huh?" mused the deputy, as he rode steadily into the bad lands. "That accounts fer his tryin' tuh shoot me at the Manzanita this afternoon. They had him planted in town tuh git rid o' me."

There had been plenty of volunteers for a posse, back in Dos Palmas. But the young deputy had his own reasons for wanting to make this man hunt back into the Funeral Mountains alone.

In the first place, a dozen years along the waste lands of the Mexican border had taught Bob MacQueen many things. One of these was that it was impossible for a large body of gunmen to ride anywhere without a sizable dust cloud revealing their location to enemy eyes.

As it was, MacQueen was mounted on the fastest bronc in Grapevine County. The sorrel had belonged to his murdered brother, Bruce. Now, master and horse had grown to know each other like brothers. In case of desperate emergency, Deputy Death knew that he could depend upon Prince to the utmost.

Night overtook Deputy Death two miles from Dos Palmas. He made camp on the top of a rim-rocked butte which commanded a view of the surrounding country and would give him protection in case of attack.

As night fell over the bad lands, softening the outlines of the craggy mountains and filling the barrancas with blue shadows, the young man hunter took provisions from his saddlebags, made a fire in the shelter of some boulders using mesquite chunks and dry sagebrush for fuel, and prepared himself a meal.

Prince, although he whickered plaintively for water during the evening, contented himself with grazing at the crown of the table-land. He wore rawhide hobbles, in lieu of a picket rope.

Deputy Death slept that night with his Winchester .30-30 alongside his bed. Long years as a lawman had taught him the secret of sleeping with one eye and both ears open, but the night passed without cause for alarm.

Dawn found the deputy in the saddle. Five miles of easy riding brought him to a branch of the Rio Torcido, where he and Prince drank, and Bob filled the canteen which hung from his saddle horn.

The tracks of the Comanche Killer's gang told Deputy Death that the outlaw band was making a leisurely get-away, evidently being satisfied with their loot and intending to hole up in the Funeral Range for several months to come.

At noon, deep in the heart of the wild Funeral ridges, Bob MacQueen came across the last night's camp of the gang. Around the dead ashes

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of the camp fire were strewn empty cartridges, cigarette butts, whisky bottles.

"They didn't make a very early start," surmised Deputy Death, reading the trail sign with uncanny ability. "I reckon before night I'll be ketchin' up with 'em."

The country became more broken, with long canyons to be avoided and countless pot-holes and sharp-spined ridges to slow down his traveling time. But from the condition of the outlaw trail, he was sure that the Comanche Killer's gang was traveling much slower than he.

Mid-afternoon brought the young lawman to a mountain bench dotted with stunted piñon and juniper growth. The only exit was by way of a brush-choked coulee, and through it MacQueen made his way, riding with hand on gun butt, alert for a glimpse of the outlaw band he knew to be riding not far ahead.

Prepared for surprise though he was, Deputy Death was not expecting to stumble across the gang when he did.

Rounding a bend of steep red cliffs, the young lawman suddenly found himself overlooking a small sink known as Coffee Cup Basin, in the center of which babbled a cold-water spring.

And grouped about the Coffee Cup water hole were the thirty-odd members of the Comanche Killer's outfit, watering their horses and resting themselves!

He had ridden out on the Coffee Cup rim rock too openly to attempt to conceal himself. And even as Prince reared on his hind legs and whirled to the lawman's deft reining, Bob MacQueen saw Slick Lester leap up from where he had been squatting by the edge of the spring.

"Deputy Death!" yelled the former Dos Palmas gambler. "Vamose, gang! He may have a posse."

More than half the gang had loosened the latigos of their saddles, and were therefore unable to get under way quickly. But the half-naked Comanche Killer, accompanied by Slick Lester, were in the saddle in a twinkling.

Deputy Death jerked his .45 from leather, uncertain what to do. The outlaws grouped about the spring below were scrambling for their horses, but they were out of six-gun range. The gang was heading for the opposite rim of Coffee Cup Basin, fearful that the lone rider on the rim rock might be backed by a posse.

"There's goin' tuh be trouble poppin' when they git tuh that rim an' see I'm alone!" gasped Deputy Death. "I reckon the thing fer me tuh do is hit fer the high country an' lose myself. Then I'll hole up!"

Wheeling Prince, Deputy Death clapped the spurs down hard and headed out across the piñon-dotted mesa, intending to lose himself in the tangled upheaval of valleys and cliffs and ridges to the southeast.

Even as he did so, Slick Lester and the Comanche Killer, accompanied by over half of the outlaw gang, came galloping out of the Coffee Cup Basin.

As the deputy feared, the outlaws now saw that he was riding alone, with no posse to back him up.

Slick Lester was the first to realize that they had been followed by a lone rider. His whoop of triumph brought twenty outlaws to a thundering halt on the rim rock beside him.

Then, at a waved command from the Comanche Killer, Slick Lester and a dozen riders headed out across the mesa at an angle designed to head off Deputy Death before he

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could reach the protection of the hills.

"Think they'll gun me down, huh?" grunted Bob MacQueen, leaning over and hauling the .30-30 Winchester from its boot under his saddle skirts. "Not while I'm a-ridin' this Prince hoss, they won't! An' they better scatter afore I git tuh that ridge ahead, or I'll scatter 'em myself—with this rifle!"

Threading through the piñons and juniper clumps, Bob MacQueen found himself confronted by a shelf of white granite. As his horse galloped out of the brush onto the rock, Deputy Death suddenly yanked back the reins and slid his sorrel to a bucking halt, not five feet from the gaping abyss of a canyon!

A yell of dismay scissored from Bob MacQueen's lips, as he spurred forward and looked over the edge. Seventy feet below, the Rio Torcido slid along in its cliff-walled channel, and the opposite side of the canyon was twenty feet away!

Behind him came the thunder of outlaw riders, fanning out to trap him at cliff's edge. Already the young lawman could pick up the hoarse shouts of riders, the popping of six-guns, the crackling of brush as horses plowed through.

"This is what we git fer kitin' off across unknown country, Prince!" moaned Deputy Death, cranking a cartridge into the breech of his Winchester. "They got us trapped in the open!"

CHAPTER VII.

OVER THE CLIFF.

BOB MACQUEEN dismounted, trailed his horses' reins, and leaped to the protection of a near-by boulder.

Whipping the rifle to his cheek, the deputy caught sight of a Mexican outlaw crashing through the brush a hundred yards to the left, making for the open.

Crack! MacQueen's .30-30 thundered, and the Mexican let go his reins to claw at a spouting hole in his neck.

The galloping horse, spotting the canyon brink in time to swerve to avoid going over the edge, hurled its rider from the saddle.

MacQueen's stomach crawled as he saw the sombreroed man go hurtling through space, crash against the rim rock and roll over the brink, to land with a grisly splash in the river far below.

The other outlaws were shouting madly at one another, and were dismounting. Above the roar of the Indians and Mexicans composing the gang, Bob MacQueen could hear the hoarse voice of Slick Lester bawling orders:

"Out o' yore saddles, ever'body! We got that MacQueen jigger trapped on the rim o' the canyon, an' he cain't git away from us! Ever'body git under cover, an' we'll sneak up on 'im!"

Deputy Death squatted behind his boulder and levered another shell into his rifle. His darting eyes shuttled up and down the brushy front of the rock table on which he had been trapped, hunting for the darting forms of outlaw killers.

He caught sight of a black-skinned Apache slinking forward through the piñons, a rifle clutched in one hand. MacQueen fired blindly through the brush and had the satisfaction of seeing the redskin go reeling out into the open, leg broken by a slug.

Brang! A high-calibered slug bit a chunk from the top of the boulder behind which the skeleton-dressed lawman was crouching.

Outlaws were wriggling on their

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stomachs through the brush, getting nearer and nearer the edge of the canyon where they had their quarry trapped.

Suddenly an idea occurred to Deputy Death. It was a wild chance for escape, but if it worked out——

Leaving his boulder hide-out, Bob MacQueen sprinted across open ground toward his waiting horse. A moment later, he was unbuckling the thirty-foot lariat coiled on his pommel.

"I'm goin' tuh be leavin' yuh, Prince!" panted the deputy, as he shook out the lasso noose. "There's a good chance that we'll never see each other ag'in, ol' pal."

The outlaws back in the brush were advancing slowly, each man fearing a bullet from the straight-shooting deputy at cliff edge. Taking advantage of the few seconds remaining before the foremost of the crooks should reach the edge of the brush and thus be able to see him, Bob MacQueen led his faithful pony to the brink of the canyon.

Halting Prince broadside to the abyss, Bob MacQueen began whirling his lass' rope overhead. His cowboy-trained eye was fixed on a piñon stump growing at the edge of the opposite cliff.

Swish! Through the air the lariat noose snaked its way, the loop falling true over the piñon stump.

A moment later, Bob MacQueen was drawing the rope tight, and was dallying the end about his saddle horn.

This formed a rope bridge across the canyon. Once on the other side, MacQueen was confident of being able to gun the approaching crooks to cover.

Only one thing remained to do, before he was ready to put his daring scheme into operation. Seizing his Winchester, Bob MacQueen picked out a clump of tobacco brush across the canyon, and hurled the rifle like a spear through the air. The .30-30 landed in the brush, bounced, and slid to a stop, well away from the opposite edge of the canyon.

MacQueen turned to his horse, patting it affectionately on the muzzle.

"So long, Prince, amigo—jest brace yoreself, now."

Shoving his six-guns tightly into their holsters, Deputy Death gripped the lariat rope with both hands and swung himself out over the brink of the cliff.

Hand-over-hand, he made his way out above the river, which foamed over its rocky bed fifty feet below. The horse braced itself firmly as it felt the strain of MacQueen's weight tugging at the saddle horn.

Then it was that Slick Lester, braver than the rest of the outlaws, wriggled his way to the edge of the brush and looked out across the open rocks to the spot where Bob MacQueen's horse stood spread-legged on the rim rock.

"So that's the critter's game, huh?" chuckled the Dos Palmas gambler, cocking his six-guns and stalking out of the brush into the open. "Come on, gang—we got Deputy Death fer shore, now!"

A dozen outlaws leaped from cover to follow their leader across the open rocks to the edge of the Rio Torcido's canyon. A throaty guffaw of fiendish laughter burst from Slick Lester, as he saw Bob MacQueen halt halfway to the opposite side of the canyon, hanging by both hands from the slender lariat.

The young lawman's heart turned to a block of ice as he dangled there,

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staring at the leering outlaws who were collecting on the edge of the canyon beside his horse.

Every hand clutched a Colt .45, leveled at his midriff. Slick Lester's brutal face was twisted into a scornful leer, as he holstered his own guns.

"Thought yuh'd skin acrost this rope bridge an' git away afore we found out what was happenin', huh?" chuckled Lester, rubbing his palms together in glee. "Well, gang, this is jest whar we been wantin' tuh git Deputy Death. Watch me!"

Bob MacQueen's heaving lungs became paralyzed as he saw the evil gambler draw a razor-edged bowie knife from a sheath inside his boot.

In an instant, Bob MacQueen saw the fate which Slick Lester intended for him. A fate far worse than being riddled by outlaw lead.

Slick Lester's yellow-toothed grin broadened as he saw the sweat burst in glistening drops from Bob MacQueen's pores. The deputy was helpless, hanging there in mid-air halfway across the rope bridge which he had flung across the canyon.

The deputy glanced downward, his stomach crawling at the sight of the blue river beneath him, sliding along between the cliff walls. He was still ten feet from the nearest rim rock, where the piñon stump that served to anchor his rope bridge was located.

The outlaws stared in rapt fascination at Lester's knife, as the big gambler from Dos Palmas lifted his bowie and laid the keen blade upon the taut rope, inches from the saddle horn.

"O. K., Deputy Death! Say yore prayers on the way down!"

With the words, Slick Lester sawed the blade of his bowie across the taut lariat.

Twang! The rope parted like a breaking fiddle string, and Bob MacQueen's body shot downward toward the river.

Streaking feet-first through empty space, Bob MacQueen had sense enough to let go the rope, which remained tied to the stump and would have dashed him against the opposite cliff if he had held on.

Whissh! Air whistled by Bob MacQueen's ears as he shot down, jackknifing his body into diving position as the river sped up to meet him.

CHAPTER VIII.

OUTLAW LOOT.

A GEYSER of white water spouted from the surface of the Rio Torcido as Bob MacQueen's hurtling body dived beneath the surface.

Expecting to have his brains dashed out instantly on the sharp rocks which studded the river's bottom, Bob MacQueen instantly flattened out his diving course through the water.

He was dimly conscious of being surprised to find the river deep and cold and dark. Like a streaking otter his body flashed along the river's bottom, then came gradually upward until his brown hair broke the surface of the river.

Gasping for breath, Bob MacQueen clung to water-grass growing at the edge of the bank, and peered about him. Overhead and about fifty yards upstream, he could see the heads of Slick Lester and his gang peering over the brink of the cliff, searching for signs of the lawman they had plunged, as they thought, to his doom.

The slashed rope dangled from the opposite cliff. The current swashing down between the granite cliffs filled the canyon with strange

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whisperings, as if warning MacQueen of peril.

Sucking his lungs full of air, Bob MacQueen submerged himself and swam out into the channel once more. The wash of the stream bore him swiftly along the river bed and around a bend of the canyon.

Deputy Death felt his lungs bursting for air, so he came to the surface again, to find himself swimming in quieter water and safely out of sight of the bandits on the rim rock overhead.

"Mebbe I ain't licked yet!" gasped the young lawman, as he dragged himself ashore. "Them skunks is campin' back thar at that Coffee Cup water hole, an' night is comin' on. I reckon I——"

And then Bob MacQueen's face suddenly drained of color. His exploring hands had gone to the black holsters at his hips, to make the discovery that both his .45 six-guns were gone!

"Fell out while I was tumblin' through space!" gasped the lawman, suddenly sick with dread. "That means I'm afoot an' weaponless, up hyar in outlaw country."

Dragging himself up on a grass-covered bank to rest, Bob MacQueen suddenly remembered something, which revived his drooping spirits—his rifle which he had hurled across the chasm, to await his arrival across the rope bridge:

"By golly, they ain't got no way o' gittin' that gun, even if they know it's thar!" cried Deputy Death. "With that gun in my mitts, I reckon I'm set."

The bottom of the Rio Torcido's gorge provided plenty of trail room, so that the young deputy was able to scramble for a half mile up the canyon and reach a side draw knifing off through the cliffs.

Dusk was falling rapidly over the Funeral Range, as Bob MacQueen started climbing the rock-choked draw leading him to the top of the mesa, on the side to which he had thrown his rifle.

He resembled a human skeleton in the deepening gloom as he climbed out of the draw and started walking through the brush and rocks in the direction of the spot where he had left the Winchester.

The dying sunset glow in the west caught the white ribs, backbone, and legs of the skeleton costume, throwing them into sharp relief against the black of his shirt and chaps. The effect was uncanny as night deepened, and a crescent moon cruised up over the black crags.

An hour later, Bob MacQueen was groping his way along the rim of the Rio Torcido's gorge, searching in the moonlight for the piñon stump which he had lassoed.

He found it, without particular difficulty. Lying a few feet to one side, among the tobacco brush, was the long-barreled Winchester, its magazine loaded with .30-30 cartridges. The rifle was undamaged.

MacQueen seized up the precious gun with a cry of thanksgiving. Then his eyes bored off across the pitch-black gulf of the canyon, to the spot where he and Prince had been trapped by Slick Lester and his men.

There was no trace of Lester, the bandits, or of Prince.

"Gone back tuh their Coffee Cup camp!" growled Bob MacQueen. "I don't want them dirty skunks tuh lay hands on that hoss."

There was only one way to get to the opposite side of the canyon, the side on which the bandit camp at the Coffee Cup water hole was located. And that was by retracing his steps to the draw which broke

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the monotony of the cliffs, and scaling the opposite bank to the mesa floor.

Guided by the eerie rays of the sickle-shaped moon, Deputy Death slipped through the bad lands on noiseless feet, his skeletonlike costume making him appear like a phantom as he dipped down into the rocky draw.

It seemed hours later that he was wading the Rio Torcido at the shallows, and climbing his way up the opposite bank. The moon was high in the heavens by the time Bob MacQueen was heading back across the mesa in the direction of the outlaw camp in Coffee Cup Basin.

Footsore and exhausted in nerve and muscle, Bob MacQueen finally crept around the corner of the red cliffs where he had first surprised the Comanche Killer's gang.

Lying in wait a few minutes to make sure the bandit horde did not have a sentry on the trail, Deputy Death cocked his .30-30 rifle, nestled it on the crook of his arm, and stole forward until he reached the rim of Coffee Cup Basin.

Next to the spring blazed a ruddy camp fire. In wide circles about the flames squatted the members of the Comanche Killer's gang, smoking pipes and swapping range jokes and mending saddles or bridles or personal clothing.

The ghostly moonlight outlined steeple-peaked sombreroes on the Mexican crooks, caught the glint of coppery skin on Apache outlaws scattered among the crowd.

Grazing off to one side, where rich blue-stem carpeted the floor of Coffee Cup Basin, was the dark mass of the outlaw gang's remuda of saddle horses.

Frogs trilled in the reeds. A cruising night owl was a shadow against the star-washed sky. The frowning Funeral Mountains fenced the grim scene about.

Bob MacQueen squatted on the rim rock, keeping his rifle out of sight lest a flash of light on steel betray him. His eyes were seeking out the two leaders of that gang—the Comanche Killer and his right-hand man, Slick Lester.

He found them, seated on a Navajo blanket near the fire. Between them was the steel box containing the loot of the Dos Palmas stage depot—the government funds intended as the Fort Sunset pay roll, which twelve men had given their lives to protect, the day before.

The box was between the Comanche Killer's knees, and Slick Lester was hammering at the container with a chisel.

"It's no use, chief!" MacQueen heard the gambler rasp. "We'll have tuh wait till we kin git a blacksmith's anvil an' a sledge. That box is strong, what I mean!"

The Comanche Killer gave a reply that was inaudible to the lawman on the rim rock above.

"Reckon now's the time fer action!" grated Bob MacQueen, lifting his Winchester to his shoulder.

So saying, the young deputy sheriff from Dos Palmas leaped out of hiding and stood exposed in the silvery rays of the moon, on the rim of the basin overlooking the waterhole camp.

"Hands up, ever' man of yuh—I got yuh covered!"

Thirty heads swiveled about as one, and then a chorus of dismayed cries went up as they saw what appeared to be a human skeleton, standing on the sky line against the Arizona stars. In the skeleton's bony arms was held a .30-30 rifle which weaved dangerously over their heads.

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"Fust man tuh reach fer his guns gits plugged!"

The outlaws had leaped to their feet, all of them in plain view of Deputy Death as the flames of the camp fire leaped and crackled. The slightest movement of a gun arm would be visible to the grim-faced young lawman on the rim rock.

But one of the half-breeds at the edge of the startled group decided to risk it. Before his gun was half out of its holster, he was writhing in agony on the ground in front of the outlaws, a .30-30 bullet in his heart.

"Slick Lester, I want you tuh pick up that strong box an' bring it hyar, savvy?" Deputy Death's voice boomed on the night air. "Move pronto!"

Ashen-faced and quivering, the treacherous gambler from Dos Palmas stooped to pick up the heavy strong box which the Comanche Killer had dropped a moment before. The Indian leader of the gang was standing like a statue, staring aghast at the skeletonlike figure above them.

Moving like a wooden man, Slick Lester staggered up the trail toward Bob MacQueen, the outlaw loot clutched in his arms.

A piercing whistle from Deputy Death, and a sorrel horse detached itself from the cavvy which was grazing at the far end of the basin. A moment later, Prince was cantering up the trail behind the staggering Lester, to join his master.

"Keep yore hands up, down thar!" yelled the deputy, as he saw the Comanche Killer's arms starting to lower. "I'll plug——"

But for an instant, the bulk of Slick Lester was between the young lawman on the rim rock, and the masked leader of the trembling gang grouped about the camp fire.

The Comanche Killer moved with lightninglike speed, to snatch the Navajo blanket off the ground where he had been sitting. In the same motion, he swept the billowing blanket over the camp fire, plunging Coffee Cup Basin into darkness.

"After him!" screamed the Indian. "Get Deputy Death!"

Instantly, the outlaw gang broke in wild confusion and headed for their horses. MacQueen's rifle roared in the night, but his slugs went wild.

Five feet in front of him, Slick Lester was dropping the strong box and going for his own guns.

Wildly, Bob MacQueen yanked the lever of his Winchester, as he saw both of the gambler's blue-barreled .45s leaping from their holsters.

Brrrrang! Bang! Flame spat from Lester's guns, and a slug tore through the skin of Deputy Death's right leg as he thrust his rifle forward and pulled trigger.

Spang! The heavier roar of the .30-30 seemed to quench the stabbing flames from Slick Lester's six-guns, as the traitorous gambling man from Dos Palmas was dumped backward by the impact of a steel-jacketed rifle bullet in his skull.

A fighting grin bent Bob MacQueen's lips as he peered down through the boiling smoke, glimpsing the Comanche Killer and his gang as they rounded up their horses in the basin below.

"Too many tuh buck with one rifle!" judged the lawman wisely, as he leaped forward and swept up the strong box. "Come on, Prince—we're gittin' out o' hyar while we're still alive!"

The restive horse shied away from the corpse of Slick Lester sprawled across the trail, as Bob MacQueen leaped aboard the sorrel's bare back. Under one arm was the strong box containing Uncle Sam's pay roll for

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Fort Sunset. In the other was his .30-30.

Moments later, when the heavily armed bandit gang stormed up the slope of Coffee Cup Basin, they caught only a glimpse of a skeleton-like figure vanishing in the brush of the moon-drenched mesa.

Bob MacQueen rode low on his horse's back, the night breeze parting his hair as he sped back toward Dos Palmas and safety.

"I reckon this busts up the Comanche Killer's ideas of raidin' a town in broad daylight," chuckled the deputy. "An' now that I know fer shore what part o' these bad lands the Killer holes up in, I'm goin' tuh force a show-down with that Injun skunk, afore long!"

It's shore too bad thet Depity Death didn't git a chance ter drill the Comanche Killer along with Slick Lester. With the Killer dead, his gang would shore bust up pronto. Watch fer the next story about Depity Death. Yuh'll find it in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

HOW THE BEEF HERD GREW

A MILITARY detachment, after being five years in Texas, had been ordered transferred to the Department of Missouri. They marched out of the post at Jacksboro, one morning in March, 1871, for Fort Harker, Kansas, accompanied by a beef contractor with his herd of beeves to supply meat for the men while on the trail.

A few days after leaving Jacksboro, the herd stampeded and was not rounded up for over a month, during which time bacon and beans was the diet. The sight of the herd caused great rejoicing, and the fresh beef came as a pleasant change.

It was noticed that, from time to time on the trip, the ox-team would have a new steer in it that bore a strong resemblance to the animals of the beef herd. It was also noted that work oxen that looked very familiar got mixed up in the beef herd.

In a day or two, these would disappear, and on those occasions, the beef served to the command would be tough, "raggy," and tasteless.

A good many jokes were cracked on this subject, but the contractor and his men were stolid and silent.

The curious thing about the herd was that, when it set out from Jacksboro it numbered about eighty head. One was killed every day for forty days, and when it rolled into Fort Harker, the cattle inspector on the Smoky found that it contained exactly one hundred head.

The punchers who had brought the herd in explained this by the fact that the march had been close to the old Chisholm Trail, and that steers, straying from passing herds, and feeling lonesome, had dropped into the beef herd for the sake of company.

Anyhow, it was a profitable trip for the contractor, for, after having sold his beef to the command, he found himself with twenty more head than he had started with.

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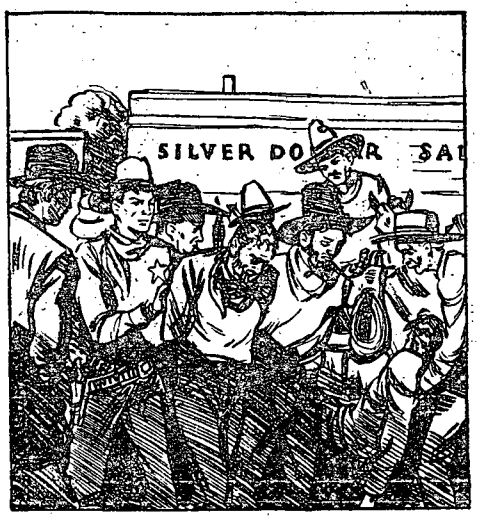
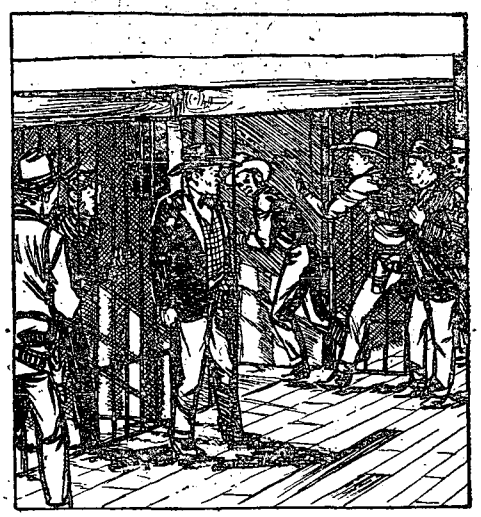
Ace Hart Stops



1. Ace Hart and his posse brought two dead and two wounded bandits back to Salt Springs on the day after those hombres had robbed the bank and ridden out of town with the loot. A crowd gathered to look at the captured killers.



2. Square-deal Herendeen and Mayor Stanton watched Ace shove the men into cells. Square-deal congratulated the deputy heartily, but a bandit snarled:

"Wait'll the boss gits after him. He'll kill the blasted——"

3. "Shut up, you!" snapped Ace, and clanged the door shut. Then he went to his office and told his friends about the capture. When he had finished, he turned to Square-deal. "Just who," he asked, "is this mysterious 'boss,' anyhow?"

4. "Nobody knows, Ace," said Square-deal. "He's been masked every time any one has seen him. He was probably behind yore father's murder, an'——"

"I'll git him," vowed Ace, "even if it takes ferever."

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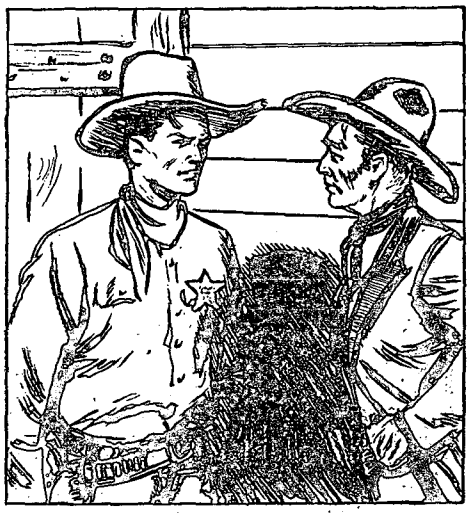
A Jail Break

5. When Ace left his office to go to supper that day, he left his old pard, Bronc Bates, in charge. He knew he could trust the old-timer—and had to grin as he saw the arsenal that Bronc had collected. Bronc grinned, too.



6. On the street, Ace met Pete Frolich, owner of the Silver Dollar Saloon. "Howdy, Ace," greeted the saloon man. "Congratulations on nabbin' them bandits, feller. But ain't yuh scared thet the boss will try tuh spring 'em on yuh?"

7. Ace shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't think the boss would dare ter try an' git 'em out."

Frolich shrugged. "I hope not, kid," he drawled, "fer yore sake." He turned and walked away.

8. Ace watched him go and a sudden suspicion sprang to life in his mind. Could Frolich, himself, be the mysterious "boss"? After supper, Ace reached the street just in time to see Frolich leaving the jail office. Ace quickened his pace.

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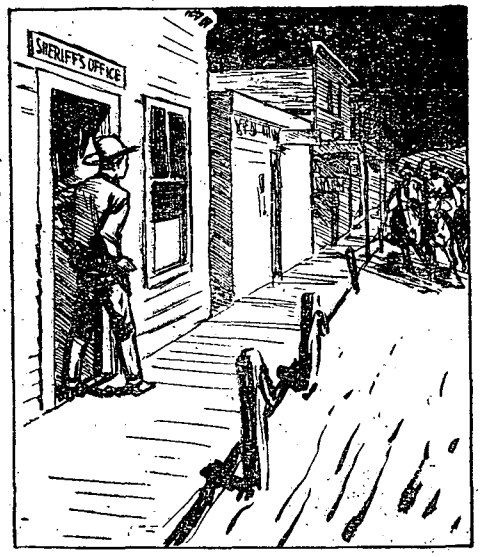
9. "What did Pete Frolich want in here, Bronc?" Ace asked.

The old-timer shrugged. "Jest passin' the time o' day," he said. "Yuh ain't suspectin' him o' bein' the boss, are yuh, son? Shucks! Pete's a plumb good feller!"

10. In spite of Bronc's words, Ace resolved to be on guard. He sent the old-timer out to scare up a special guard for the jail that night. Bronc brought in a couple of capable-looking gents. Ace swore them in as special deputies.

11. Darkness fell over Salt Springs. While Bronc and the guards sat inside the office, talking in low tones, Ace lounged in the doorway. The cow town seemed quiet. "Too danged quiet," Ace thought. "I wonder if Frolich is in the Silver——"



12. The sudden drumming of many hoofs brought Ace Hart erect with a jerk. He stepped out of the office as the band of hard-riding hombres swept down the street. Ace's veins were tingling. "Here comes trouble," he thought, "shore as——"

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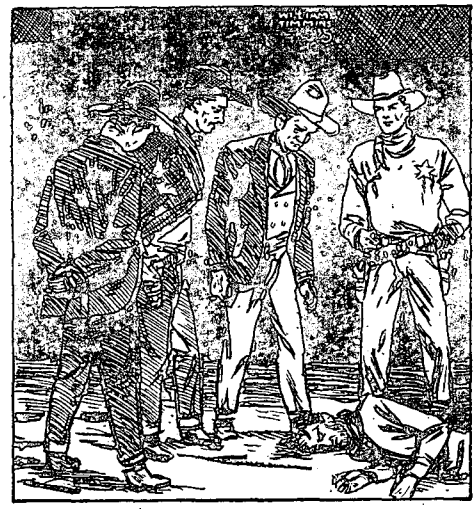
13. "What d'yuh gents want?" snapped Ace Hart.

"Them men o' mine yuh've got locked up here!" snarled the boss of the masked riders. "Let 'em out pronto, or we'll blast you an' yore jail down an' take 'em."

14. As he spoke, the man drew his guns. Ace flashed into action. As his slugs zipped toward the boss, the jail guards leaped out. Guns crashed and roared. The boss and two raiders fell. The rest fled. They hadn't counted on extra guards.

15. Ace Hart's fingers trembled as he knelt in the road and pulled the mask from the face of the fallen leader. Then he started in surprise. For the face was not that of Pete Frolich, as he'd expected. The man was a stranger to Ace.



16. And neither Square-deal Herendeen, Pete Frolich, the mayor, nor any one else could identify him. But they all agreed he was the boss. Probably his gang would now scatter. Ace figured that his father's murder was avenged.

Next Week: "Ace Hart Meets A Tough One."

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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, I feel like I been on a long v'yage or somethin'. Fact is I been changin' bunk houses. It's a sad business. All yore belongin's look kind o' lost an' gloomy; an' yuh keep findin' thet yuh've lost this or thet bit o' paper thet yuh'd been savin' fer ol'-time's sake.

Howsomever, hyar I am, jest about settled now, probably fer a good long while, an' the fust thing I kin think of is tuh git yuh folks all tuhgether agin' fer our ol' song fest.

While I was busy totin' my things around a couple of interestin' things come in the mail. I reckon yuh'd like tuh hear 'em yoreselves. Fer instance, Mary Magee, of Texas sends in a jim-dandy and writes:

"The following song was found among my dad's, 'John Bud Magee's,' possessions of his cowboy days in the old South and West back in the 1890s and earlier. It's origin I have never known."

COWBOY NIGHT SONG

The stars are winking at the moon, Sing ho, ya-ho.
The wolves are howling out of tune, Sing ho, ya-ho.
The nighthawks spread their wings on high,
And cut their diddoes in the sky.
The owl in silence bats his eye, Sing ho, ya-ho.

The sleeping cattle have no fear, Sing ho, ya-ho,
When my angelic voice they hear, Sing ho, ya-ho.
The gray wolf sneaks across the trail,
The whip-poor-wills above me sail,
The bobcats in the canyon wail, Sing ho, ya-ho.

With fear I feel my broncho quake, Sing ho, ya-ho.
I gaze upon the moon so fair,
And wonder, as it hangs in the air,
If cowboys are a-riding there, Sing ho, ya-ho.

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My riding days will soon be done, Sing ho, ya-ho.
I'm going to wed my little one, Sing ho, ya-ho.
A pretty little Texas pearl,
And try the tied-up life a whirl, Sing ho, ya-ho.

My love is like a prairie rose, Sing ho, ya-ho.
She's thoroughbred from head to toes, Sing ho, ya-ho.
Her smile is like the burning sun,
We now are two; we'll soon be one,
Then I will be her son-of-a-gun, Sing ho, ya-ho.

Now, what next? Hyar's a song sent in by Roy Price, of Oklahoma:

WAY OUT WEST IN TEXAS

Way out West in Texas,
That's where I long to be,
Riding on the prairie
With a good horse under me.
Three long years I burned around,
My heart is sad and blue;
I'm going back to the woolly West
Where your friends are always true.

Way out West in Texas,
Where the atmosphere is light,
You roll up in your blanket
On the prairie every night;
Where rattlesnakes and old horned toads
Sleeps right by your side;
On the desert sands of Texas
That's where I long to ride.

Way out West in Texas,
Around that old camp fire,
We sung the songs of long ago,
And strummed on my guitar.
My heart is ever yearning,
And I hope I'll be there soon—
I'll settle down in Texas
When the cactus is in bloom.

Way out West in Texas,
When they round up in the spring,
You'll hear me sing this little song
While riding on the range;
Your Broadway lights appeal to you
But moonlight suits me fine,
So I'll settle down in Texas
And leave my blues behind.

Room for one more, I reckon. Waal, hyar's one by a man thet gave the West a lot of songs—James Barton Adams, of Colorado:

A SONG OF THE RANGE.

By James Barton Adams

The bawl of a steer to a cowboy's ear is music of the sweetest strain,
And the yelling notes of the gray coyotes to him are a glad refrain;
The rapid beat of his broncho's feet on the sod as he speeds along
Keeps livening time to the ringing rhyme of his rollicking cowboy song.
His eyes are bright and his heart is light as the smoke of his cigarette,
There's never a care for his soul to hear, no troubles to make him fret;
For a kingly crown in the noisy town his saddle he would not change—
No life so free as the life we see 'way out on the cattle range.

Chorus:

Hi-lo! Hi-lay!
To the range away,
On the deck of a bronc of steel,
With a careless flirt
Of a rawhide quirt
And a dig of the roweled heel.
The winds may howl,
And the thunder growl,
Or the breeze may softly moan;
The rider's life
Is the life for me,
The saddle a kingly throne.

At the long day's close, he his broncho throws with the bunch in the hoss corral,
And a light he spies in the bright blue eyes of his welcoming rancher gal;
'Tis a light that tells of the love that dwells in the soul of his little dear,
And a kiss he slips to her waiting lips when no one is watching near.
His glad thoughts stray to the coming day when away to the town they'll ride,
And the nuptial brand by the parson's hand will be placed on his bonnie bride.
And they'll gallop back to the old home shack in the life that is new and strange—
The rider bold and the girl of gold, the queen of the cattle range.

Hi-lo! Hi-lay!
For work is play
When love's in the cowboy's eyes,
When his heart is light
As the clouds of white
That swim in the summer skies;
And his jolly song
Speeds the hours along
As he thinks of the little gal
With the golden hair
Who'll be waiting there
At the gate of the home corral.

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The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE usual, weekly meetin' o' the 3W spread is under way ag'in. An' there's a plumb fine delegation of hombres on hand ter greet us as we steps inter the Corner, packin' the week's mail in a sack over our shoulder.

The first gent we sees is none other than thet rip-snortin' young Texas Ranger, Corporal Bud Jones. Ranged alongside o' Bud we sees the four rannies from Circle J—Buck Foster, Sing Lo, Joe Scott, an' Billy West. Likewise, we sees Looshis Carey, known as the Shootin' Fool depity, down Cotulla way.

Then the door opens an' in comes Ace Hart, depity sheriff in Salt Springs, an' his grizzled pard, the ol'-timer, Bronc Bates.

We starts right in takin' the roll, but afore we gits very far, Buck Foster pipes up.

"Say," demands the veteran, "who am these huckleberries, Boss?"

We looks up an' sees thet Buck is starin' at Ace an' Bronc. And we realizes thet this is the first time thet the Circle J waddies has seen Ace. So we steps right up an' does the honors, interdoocin' 'em ter each other.

Ace an' Billy hit it off, right from the start. An' it ain't long afore Buck Foster an' Bronc Bates is discoverin' thet they got mutual friends down in the Panhandle.

"When I was ramroddin' a spread down thet a way——" Buck begins.

But he don't git far. Joe Scott happens ter hear him. The redhead puts in his two cents.

"Don't yuh pay no attention ter thet ol' coot, Bronc," says Joe. "He ain't never ramrodded no spread, a-tall, lessn it was a sheep ranch down on——"

"What's thet?" roars Buck. "Who yuh callin' a sheep-herder, yuh dog-goned sage hound? By heifers, I got a notion ter make yuh eat them words, Joe Scott. Help me, Hannah, if I ain't tired o'——"

An' the battle is on—full blast. Ace an' Bronc stare at the two rannicky pards fer a minute in pop-eyed surprise. Then we winks at Ace, an' he gits the idea—thet Buck an' Joe are allus tanglin' like a couple o' sore-nosed grizzlies.

Waal, the battle rages fer quite a spell. But then we figures it's time ter git down ter business. So——

"What d'yuh say, gents," we asks, "ter hearin' from some of our po'try-writin' pards amongst the readin' hombres? Seems like we're 'bout due ter have a poets' night, ain't we?"

"Plumb fine idea, Boss," agrees Bud Jones. "I feel jest like listenin' ter some good po'try."

Looshis Carey, Billy, an' Joe is all for the idea, too. Ace Hart allows as how it sounds good ter him, after we explains it, an' little Sing Lo nods his head till his pigtail dances an' says, "So be!"

So thet leaves only Buck ter vote "No." Thet bein' the case, we starts right in ter readin' this here letter an' pome:

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DEAR RANGE BOSS: Inclosed herewith find a poem, "Midnight On Boot Hill." The men who sleep in the Coffeyville Boot Hill, among others, are the Daltons, Texas Jack, and some lesser known robbers, fighters, and killers.

The old Whisky Trail runs through Coffeyville. Here Billy Breit made Coffeyville boots that were known throughout the cow country, including boots for the riders in the old Ringling Brothers Circus.

To the immediate south of us in Oklahoma, one-time Indian Territory, are just as good cow-punchers as ever lived in any time or place. Cherokee Bill was once a figure on the streets of Coffeyville.

The fellows who sleep in Boot Hill were a different type from modern gunmen. They had sense of honor. The old-timer put himself more in the position of a duelist than a killer.

This poem is fantasy about Boot Hill. I am sure the outfit will like it.

Yours truly,
WALTER S. KEITH.

Coffeyville, Kansas.

MIDNIGHT ON BOOT HILL

By Walter S. Keith

Last night I went down in the graveyard to
the part that is called Boot Hill,
Where sleep the spurred and booted outlaws
who were killed in Coffeyville.
I thought I'd like to visit it at midnight when
it's dim,
And hear the night wind strum the trees and
sing its lonesome hymn.

I hadn't been there long before I heard the
tread of feet,
And soon I saw the Boot Hill gang pass by
on horses fleet.
Then, through the tombstones fled these men
shouting out in glee,
And then they stopped and wheeled about and
charged straight down on me.

They all wore boots and spurs and guns, their
hats were broad and high,
And then they reined their mounts and each
one heaved a sigh.
The one who was the leader, then asked me
for a drink.
"I drink alone," said I, and then they dashed
away—to hell, I think.

Thank you, Mr. Keith. Thet shore is swell. Wish yuh could see the way the gang grins when they hear it. Drop around an' see us ag'in some night.

Now here's another one thet looks plumb good:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The accompanying doggerel is based on an incident that occurred in the panhandle of Idaho when I was riding for the forest service. I hope you may be able to find a hole for it in the Wranglers Corner.

These days, I am confined to a newspaper office, and the old 3W keeps alive in me that spirit which sent me to the land of the latigo, lariat, and longhorn in my younger days.

Sincerely yours,
STANLEY FOSS BARTLETT.

Lewiston, Maine.

THE TENDERFOOT

By Stanley Foss Bartlett

They called him "Boston" Barrington;
He hailed from out the East,
And rode so very genteellike
The horse he called a "beast."
And when the ranger issued him
A forest-service gat,
He said, "My, what a blunderbuss!
"What shall I do with that?"

He was as green as water slime,
But he was thoroughbred,
Despite the fairness of his cheek
And cap upon his head.
And when he was assigned to ride
Patrol in Godless Gap,
The ranger felt a twinge of guilt,
And murmured "Luckless sap."

Nine uneventful weeks he spent
And strangely seemed to thrive
Upon the rigors of the range—
They'd doubted he'd survive.
'Twas when two desperadoes robbed
The Lonesome general store,
The ranger said, "Call Boston in;
"They'll plug that feller, shore."

So "Windy" Wayne and "Romy" Reed
Set out to find the chump,
Lest he should cross the hombres' trail
And get it in the rump.
They rode up Busted Bubble Creek,
Already for the draw,
In case they met the rustling pair,
But this is what they saw:

They met the hombres, red with blood,
With ropes around their arms;
Behind them Boston Barrington,
Alert but very calm.

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"Good morning, gentlemen," he said,
"I'm glad to see a friend,
"For we've been riding day and night
"From Gloomy River Bend.

"And these two fellows, sad to say,
"Are needing doctor's care;
"I had to wound them for they shot
"Two bullets through my hair.
"The horses that they rode are parked
"A goodly distance back;
"I tried to bring the beasts along,
"But seemed to lack the knack."

Then Boston Barrington turned white
And slumped upon his beast,
Disclosing scars upon his head,
By whizzing bullets creased.

Some hours later when he waked
With burning brow and throb,
He murmured, "Stupid of me, what,
"To faint upon the job?"

Waal, dang our hide if thet ain't a corker! By heifers, we ain't had two sech rip-snortin' pomes at the Corner since Buck Foster's vest was new. You drop around ag'in, too, Mr. Bartlett.

An' we reckon thet thet's all we got time fer, this week. Come next week, so help us, Hannah, we're goin' ter take a look-see at what some o' the artist hombres have been doin' by the 3W waddies lately.

Remember thet, readin' hombres: Artists' night next week. Until then, adios! **THE RANGE BOSS.**

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

KID WOLF'S LAW OF THE RIO

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

Once ag'in the Soldier o' Misfortune rides the trouble trail an' finds need fer his Peacemakers in layin' down his particular brand o' law.

THE TRAIL BLASTERS

Novelette

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

Sometimes, when a trail is hard, there's jest one way ter git through—draw yore six-guns an' shoot yore way through.

DEPUTY DEATH MEETS THE COMANCHE KILLER

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

The two bitter enemies come face ter face at last, an' six-guns sing their death chant as Bob MacQueen calls a show-down.

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